

My Wife is the Demonic Cult Leader

#Chapter 1 : Inner Adminstrator Jin Yeomyung (1) - Read My Wife is the Demonic Cult Leader Chapter 1 : Inner Adminstrator Jin Yeomyung (1)

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The first life wasn't all that bad.

A hero who saved humanity. A guardian of Earth.

He received blessings from the gods along with all kinds of praise, and in return, was promised two more lives.

Though he died young due to injuries from the war, he had no regrets since he gained two more lives.

A life that continues three times. Isn't that just the best?

Though he was called a hero, he lived a miserable life full of hardship in his first life.

So in the next life, no matter what happened, he swore to live it up and enjoy a glamorous life!

Ah, I'm screwed.

Staring at the many burning pavilions, I thought to myself.

"Block them!"

"The Murim Alliance bastards have reached near the Primordial Demon Pavilion!"

"Don't let them inside!"

The countless voices ringing around me tickled my ears.

Those sounds could be categorized into roughly three types.

Shouts. The sound of blades. And screams.

If I had to sum up all three in one word—

Yeah, sounds of battle.

'The second life... is really screwed.'

After confirming the devastation outside, I let out deep sighs while quickly moving my limbs.

Of course, the direction I was heading wasn't outside.

Tens of thousands of orthodox martial artists from the Murim Alliance were swarming in all directions like ants.

If I, already gasping for air, went out there with a sword, I'd be headed straight to the afterlife the moment I swung it.

This was the result of me living it up like I swore to do in my past life.

As I ran frantically, a middle-aged man with a heavy presence suddenly jumped out in front of me.

"No, Inner Administrator! You haven't escaped yet?!"

"Huff! Huff! Ah, it's Lord San Dojeon."

He was San Dojeon, Lord of the Wind Demon Unit, one of the four demon squads stationed on the outer perimeter of the cult.

Known as Bloodless Thunderstorm.

Though people often called him "Mountain Bandit" due to his rugged appearance, regardless of his grand title.

"How could you be here without a single guard?!"

Catching my breath, I replied bluntly.

"I sent all my guards to reinforce the outer defenses. It's not like the title of Inner Administrator means much anyway, right?"

I dressed down quite a bit, so to anyone who doesn't know me, I'd just look like a regular cult foot soldier."

"A-All the same, this place is too dangerous! Please come with me!"

San Dojeon urged me anxiously to evacuate.

Of course, I knew I was in a dangerous place right now.

Just a hundred yards from here, hundreds of our cultists were locked in a desperate defense against thousands of Murim Alliance members.

But I calmly declined the offer.

“You should be the one to evacuate.

Have you forgotten the Cult Leader’s order to retreat to Shingang and prepare for the future? Your Wind Demon Unit should be preparing to fall back too.”

“What will you do, Inner Administrator?”

“What else would I do? I must go to escort the Cult Leader.”

“The Cult Leader...”

“After ordering all followers to abandon the Ten Thousand Mountain, for some reason, she hasn’t moved since.”

Before San Dojeon blocked my way, I had been heading to the Heavenly Demon Pavilion to find out why.

I lightly tapped San Dojeon on the shoulder.

“Don’t worry about me. I intend to understand her intentions and retreat together with her.”

“The situation isn’t good. Ever since those damn traitors left, morale among the followers has hit rock bottom.”

San Dojeon’s expression darkened.

The reason the gates of the Heavenly Demon Cult, with its thousand-year legacy, had been breached—

was none other than betrayal by the high-ranking insiders.

It was a shocking event that shook the very foundation of the cult, so it was understandable that morale had collapsed.

More importantly, the Cult Leader, who should’ve been rallying the troops and boosting morale, hadn’t moved since her last order.

“At this rate, the defense line will collapse in less than an hour.”

“I’ll take care of myself. You should gather your men when the time is right.”

“Understood! Please be careful, Inner Administrator!”

Perhaps realizing how dire the situation truly was, San Dojeon abruptly took off after that final warning.

I watched his retreating figure and sighed.

“Haah, this life is a total bust too, damn it.”

My name is Jin Yeomyung.

Age, 37.

Five years ago, I was appointed as the youngest Inner Administrator in the Heavenly Demon Cult. I’m also the first heir of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan, one of the cult’s undying noble households.

Well, technically not the heir anymore since my younger brother inherited the family.

Anyway, my brother took over the clan.

And I, who had been enjoying the life of a carefree idler, was forced into the vacant Inner Administrator post— thanks to my father’s “recommendation,” which was really more of a threat.

“As expected, no one’s here.”

I passed through the entrance of the Heavenly Demon Pavilion without hesitation.

“Damn those Guardians.”

Normally, if someone tried to enter like this, top experts from the Guardian Court should show up and block them.

Unfortunately, the Grand Guardian who led them had been one of the leaders of the traitors that caused this mess.

At the end of the long corridor, a massive door adorned with an Asura carving appeared.

The Heavenly Demon Pavilion.

Even here, guards were supposed to show up, take my name, and announce me inside—

‘They’re all dead.’

The iron smell of blood lingering in the air made it unnecessary to even guess what had happened here.

Facing the firmly closed doors of the Heavenly Demon Pavilion, I raised my voice quietly.

“Cult Leader, it’s Inner Administrator Jin Yeomyung. Are you inside?”

—.....

No answer came from within.

Out of courtesy, I called once more.

“Cult Leader! This is Inner Administrator Jin Yeomyung!”

Still, there was no response.

Then, when I finally raised my voice rudely—

“Hey! Cult Lead—!”

A woman’s low voice came from within.

“Come in, Inner Administrator.”

Flinch!

‘Damn it! That scared the crap out of me!’

If she was going to answer, she could’ve just done it the first time!

‘No way... did she hear me talking back?’

Wait, it got cut off midway, so maybe it’s fine?’

Nervously, I pushed open the door to the Heavenly Demon Pavilion.

Creeeeeak—

The heavy resistance was felt at my fingertips right away.

'Damn it, those bastard Guardians! Couldn't one of them have stayed behind to open the door?'

Honestly, this door is ridiculously heavy.

So much so that it's impossible to open without internal energy.

"Huff, huff!"

After a struggle that lasted about a minute, I finally managed to open the door.

The sweat dripping down my neck felt incredibly unpleasant.

But just then—

Whoooosh!

A cool breeze blew from within and cooled the sweat on my skin.

An artificial wind that shouldn't exist in such a sealed indoor space.

The being who created that breeze was inside.

I kept walking further inward.

At the highest seat of honor in the great hall at the heart of the Heavenly Demon Pavilion—

There sat Cheon Yura, the 29th Cult Leader of the Heavenly Demon Cult, and The Demonic Faction Grandmaster, in perfect composure.

"C-Cult Leader, I pay my respects."

A faint smile hung on Cheon Yura's face as she looked at me.

"Your martial skills are still worse than those of third-rate demonic minions."

She had clearly watched me struggling at the entrance from her throne.

Catching my breath, I replied.

"Thank goodness the other Elders or Lords didn't see that mess."

It wasn't like I was completely hopeless.

My internal energy was still around first-rate level.

The Cult Leader looked down at me with an amused expression.

“True. If the First Elder had seen you rudely speaking to me like that, he wouldn’t have let it slide.”

I cursed inwardly.

‘Damn!’

So she heard it all!

Considering her usual temper, it wouldn’t have been strange if a blade had flown at me.

And yet, she had even cooled me off with a breeze.

She didn’t seem intent on rebuking my insolence today.

“Don’t you have any thoughts of training?”

I grumbled in reply.

“What’s the point of training now? It’s already too late.”

“That’s a shame. I remember you had quite a bit of talent.”

“I guess so. If I’d actually put in the effort, all the top seats in the Cult hierarchy would’ve been pushed back one by one.”

“Ku ku ku!”

The Cult Leader chuckled like she’d just heard an entertaining joke.

Well, she might not believe it, but it was sort of true.

The real problem was that I never followed through.

In this life, I’d leeched off the prestige of my clan and lived the sweet life.

Neglecting martial arts, I ended up being parachuted into the Inner Administrator position and became infamous as the weakest in the Cult’s leadership.

“So, our weakest Inner Administrator—what brings you before your Cult Leader?”

With her sarcastic question, I grumbled back.

“What else? I came to drag our heavy-bottomed Cult Leader to Xinjiang.”

“Fufufu, it’s truly a pity the First Elder can’t hear this.”

“That’s exactly why I’m saying it.”

If I had said something that cheeky in a proper council meeting, the furious First Elder’s sword would’ve already sliced my throat.

And even if not the First Elder, other loyal Elders would’ve pounced on me.

‘But right now, there’s no one else here.’

The First Elder had perished at the hands of the Cult’s traitors.

The other Elders either helped kill him, died with him, or were out there leading the remaining cultists.

I dropped my playful tone and confronted the Cult Leader directly.

“Why haven’t you moved?”

The answer came right away.

But it wasn’t the one I wanted.

“Heaven-Destroying Poison.”

“...What?”

“Massacre Blood Poison. Formless Poison. Bone-Melting Elixir of Emotion. Spirit-Breaking Immortal Disabler...”

“N-No.”

“There are a few more, but that about sums it up.”

I wasn’t dumb enough to not recognize the names she was listing.

“You’re... poisoned?”

On the surface, she looked perfectly fine.

But I doubted she was joking at a time like this.

The Cult Leader silently nodded.

I asked again.

“Who did it?”

One name kept circling my mind.

“Don’t tell me... the Demonic Faction Lord? That bastard did this?”

There weren’t many who had the guts to try poisoning the Cult Leader like this.

She wouldn’t be an easy target to begin with, and unless the person was an extremely close aide, it would’ve been impossible.

But if I had to name one highly likely candidate among those close aides—

It could only be one man.

The Demonic Faction Lord, Han Mubaek.

Son-in-law to the previous Cult Leader and the Demon Lord Cheon Taejong, who stood above the Heavenly Demon.

In other words, the man chosen as husband to the current Cult Leader, Cheon Yura.

And now, the leader of the traitors who had flung open the gates of the Ten Thousand Mountains to the orthodox Murim Alliance.

The Cult Leader’s voice dropped slightly.

“Before he left me, he said this—

That this had been planned long ago. That it was so hard to get close to me and earn both mine and the previous Cult Leader’s favor.”

“.....”

“The poisons in my body—he said they were his way of asking me to acknowledge the hardship he went through.”

“That crazy son of a... ah, damn.”

I blurted out a curse without thinking, right in front of the Cult Leader.

Realizing my slip, I immediately covered my mouth, but the Cult Leader laughed with amusement.

“Fufufu, you really are amusing.”

“How can you laugh at a time like this?!”

Just one of those poisons was enough to melt even a peak-level expert.

She had taken at least five or six of them.

No matter how powerful she was, even she couldn’t withstand that.

“At first, I thought Han Mubaek had sent you to finish the job. To confirm my condition and tie up loose ends.”

My face twisted in disbelief.

“Who in their right mind would send someone like me as an assassin?”

“That’s why I quickly dropped the suspicion. Watching you groan just to open a door was so pathetic it made me laugh.”

“Agh, come on.”

Sweat ran down my face under the Cult Leader’s barrage of jabs.

Even so, my expression twisted further with frustration.

The Cult Leader normally never joked like this.

As a woman who had risen to the seat of Cult Leader, she had always disciplined herself strictly to uphold her authority.

Always solemn, always dignified, always stern.

That was the image shown by the current Cult Leader of the Heavenly Demon Cult and Great Master of the Demonic Path, the Heartless Demonic Empress, Cheon Yura.

For her to appear this relaxed now...

“Is it... too late?”

At my sullen question, Cheon Yura smiled faintly.

“Probably. Once the Heaven-Destroying Poison seized my Dantian, it was already too late. I could manage the rest, but not that one. Ha, if only I’d noticed it three years earlier.”

Her hollow laughter echoed throughout the hall.

I bowed my forehead to the floor.

“I’m sorry, Cult Leader. If only I’d done better.”

“No need. I don’t blame you. When Han Mubaek held all key positions within the Cult, what could you have done with the now-empty post of Inner Administrator?”

“Still, if I had realized that Han Mubaek was a spy planted by an external force, things wouldn’t have gone this far.”

“Well, that couldn’t be helped. Everyone was fooled by him.”

You, me, even Father.

The Cult Leader muttered bitterly, then looked toward me.

“Escape. It’s not too late, even now.”

“I won’t leave without you, Cult Leader.”

Even though I spoke from a place of loyalty, the Cult Leader tilted her head slightly.

“I didn’t know you were such a loyal man.”

“I do value my life, but I still have at least a shred of loyalty.”

“Loyalty, huh.”

Her expression darkened slightly.

Loyalty, not devotion.

To her, the man before her was nothing more than a noble son once considered as a potential political marriage partner when she was a young Cult Heir.

That was the extent of their “connection.”

...Or so she probably thought.

The truth was different.

‘Honestly, it is too late. If I were anywhere near the Master level, I’d have just bolted already.’

With my barely first-rate-level movement techniques, there was no escaping the clutches of flying Master-level experts.

‘If that’s the case, then next time, I’ll make sure...’

I steeled my resolve and looked up to meet the Cult Leader’s gaze.

“Cult Leader.”

“Speak.”

“If, hypothetically...”

“Yes.”

“If really, hypothetically speaking...”

“Yes.”

“If I mean really, really hypothetically...”

“...If you say ‘hypothetically’ one more time, I’ll rip out your tongue. Get to the point.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Cowardly, I nodded repeatedly under the thick killing intent pressing against my skin.

At last, the big question left my mouth.

“If you had one more chance to reincarnate—what would you do?”

“..Reincarnate?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

The Cult Leader didn’t seem to understand what I was saying, but from my perspective, I was making a heartfelt confession.

“Didn’t we talk about this in the past?”

“It’s hard to believe that you, of all people, saved the world in a past life...”

Her cynical gaze was downright disrespectful.

“So, what—you’re saying that because you saved the world in a past life, you’re granted one more chance?”

“You catch on quickly.”

Cheon Yura's eyebrows furrowed slightly.

'Is this punk mocking me right now?'

'Just because I eased up a little, he dares to play games at a time like this?'

Her face clearly said as much.

Reading her inner thoughts, I slowly bowed deeply before her.

"Even if I get one more chance to reincarnate, you probably wouldn't remember what's happening now."

"....."

"But if there's something you wish for, I—Jin Yeomyung, who remembers this moment—will do everything in my power to make it happen."

Right here, right now, I made a decision.

The traitors who betrayed the Cult.

The orthodox Murim Alliance scum who invaded the Ten Thousand Ten Thousand Mountains.

And the third party that orchestrated this whole catastrophe.

Even if I have to stake my soul—

I will slaughter them all.

"....."

The Cult Leader remained silent for a long time.

I assumed she was about to strike me down.

It wouldn't have been surprising if she exploded in rage after thinking she'd been made a fool of.

"Setting aside whether what you said is true..."

She finally opened her mouth, with difficulty.

"Why would you go so far for me?"

She now understood that the man before her was offering everything purely for her sake.

“Well, nothing too deep.”

I raised my head and shrugged.

“First off, I’m not the kind of guy who lets things slide when I’ve been wronged.”

I may have lived quietly in this life, but I’m the type who always pays back kindness and revenge alike.

“And also, I owe you a debt. I figured I’d repay it while I’m at it.”

“A debt?”

“Don’t think too much about that part. I just mean I need to take out the trash ahead of time so I can live in peace in my next life.”

I spoke with heartfelt sincerity.

Thanks to that, she quickly lost interest in the so-called “debt” I mentioned.

“Hmph.”

The Cult Leader let out a small laugh.

“Reincarnation, huh.”

A claim so outrageous it could easily be dismissed as nonsense.

Though still perplexed, she didn’t get angry.

Was it because she believed this really was the end?

Was she indulging my nonsense out of amusement?

Or... did she really believe me?

Her lips slowly parted.

“If what you said is true, could I ask one favor of you?”

“Whatever it is, say the word.”

“If you truly do reincarnate...”

“If I do?”

“Hmm...”

For some reason, she trailed off.

And then—she said something that, had I been drinking tea, I would’ve spat it right out.

“Could you... try courting me?”

“...Excuse me?”

Dumbfounded, I repeated her words like an idiot.

Chapter 2: Inner Administrator Jin Yeomyung (2)

“Could you seduce me a little?”

“.....”

Hmm.

Silence settled in the Grand Pavilion.

And it kept lingering in the air.

As I stood dumbfounded, mouth slightly agape, the Cult Leader frowned and shouted at me.

“Hey, when someone talks to you, shouldn’t you at least give a reply?”

“Ah, y-yes...”

Still trying to process what I had just heard, I slowly rubbed the area below my ear.

“Hmm. When did my ears get hit with a sound-based technique?”

“Shall I rip your ears off? At your level as Inner Administrator, you could probably survive even in this state.”

A terrifying killing intent burst from her body.

Goosebumps prickled across my skin.

“I apologize, Cult Leader. That was a slip of the tongue.”

The Cult Leader let out a soft sigh and spoke.

“That was a joke just now. Even if it’s our final meeting, I suppose I spoke too lightly.”

I chuckled quietly.

“I don’t mind if you speak lightly. No, I actually prefer it this way. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen this human side of you, Cult Leader.”

Flinch!

“R-Really?”

“Yes, it’s true.”

The last of the last.

Maybe her heart had softened with death so close at hand?

She seemed to have decided to cast off some of the rigid decorum between ruler and vassal.

“Haa, fine. From now on, there’s no need to call me Cult Leader. Speak casually.”

Did she think the weight of formal ranks didn’t suit the moment?

Well, the atmosphere had turned strange anyway.

Then... what should I call her?

“Hmm, then... Miss Cheon Yura?”

“.....”

“.....”

Once again, silence fell over the hall.

With just that one sentence, the Cult Leader’s face—and even her entire body—froze like a statue.

At that moment, I had no doubt she’d swing her hand to take off my head.

But surprisingly, her reaction was completely different from what I expected.

She slowly brought both hands to cover her mouth.

“That’s a bit... embarrassing.”

“.....”

For a brief moment,

I stared blankly at her.

Gone was the dignity and charisma I’d always seen—before me now was simply a girl.

‘She’s beautiful.’

It had been twenty years since I first saw her, and yet she hadn’t changed much, only grown slightly more mature.

‘No, that’s not right.’

As I shook my head, her voice continued.

“I’ve long since passed the age of thirty. The title ‘Miss’... doesn’t suit me.”

To be honest, she was closer to forty than thirty.

But pointing that out might literally get me killed, so I quickly swallowed the thought and changed the subject.

“I suppose I’m a little embarrassed too. I’ll just go back to calling you Cult Leader.”

“...Do as you like.”

That awkward, slightly strange air between us faded.

I let out a sigh.

“If I didn’t mishear just now... that means you want me to go after the title of Demonic Faction Lord, correct?”

“Interpretations can say more than the original words, but sure, let’s say that’s what I meant.”

For some reason, her tone sounded slightly displeased.

But I ignored that and asked her sincerely.

“Why go out of your way?”

“.....”

She gave no answer to that question.

“I’m confident I can stop Han Mubaek from becoming the Demonic Faction Lord. But becoming your partner... that’s a different matter.”

With wounded eyes, she spoke.

“Are you saying... you don’t like me?”

Even as she looked at me with a gaze full of pleading, I remained firm.

“To be honest, you know as well as I do that it’s near impossible.”

The moment those words cut deep, her face twisted in pain.

“Kh!”

“Love requires both people to want it. And honestly, thinking back to your days as the Young Cult Leader...”

How was anyone supposed to win your heart when you not only rejected men but smashed them into pieces?

“You were a tyrant no one could stop back then.”

She’d actually toned down after becoming Cult Leader and closing off her heart, but back then, seriously... whew!

“To be blunt, one of the biggest reasons Han Mubaek made it to Demonic Faction Lord was because he was the only one who could endure your temper, wasn’t it?”

“.....”

Her lips immediately jutted out.

Sure, the real turning point was the massive achievements Han Mubaek brought from outside—but what I said wasn’t wrong either.

I, who had the backing of a prestigious family, lost to Han Mubaek for a simple reason.

I’d been leeching off my family and had little interest in romance.

More importantly, I had no reason to cater to the temper of the ill-tempered Cult Leader.

She whipped her head away.

"Hmph. Forget it if you don't want to. My pride as Cult Leader isn't so low that I'd beg someone like you."

Her pouty face practically shouted, 'I'm sulking,' and I let out an involuntary chuckle.

For some reason, she looked... rather cute.

"Who said it was impossible?"

As I softly laughed and shook my head, her eyes subtly turned toward me.

"Romance often starts when someone interested in love sparks those feelings in someone who isn't."

If both sides are interested, the relationship progresses quickly. If not, then time and effort are needed to move the other's heart.

And yes, that process is likely to be described as desperate and pathetic nine times out of ten.

"For you, Cult Leader, that much effort is no trouble at all."

"R-Really?"

Her expression lightened just a bit.

Even if a proper romance was impossible, at the very least, politically winning the title of Demonic Faction Lord was within reach.

But it didn't seem like what she meant now was a political proposal for me to approach her.

'Honestly... it's not like I never had feelings for her.'

I spoke to her.

"If you promise me one thing, I'll give it a shot."

"What is it?"

"Swear that you'll forgive me even if I speak harshly about your past. And if possible, tell me some of your weaknesses."

".....Ha."

She looked incredulous.

“You want me to expose the shameful parts of my past to someone like you?”

“If you don’t, I can’t guarantee I’ll succeed in courting you. And really, what does it matter? Is there even a reason to be proud at this point?”

“E-Even so...”

“Then forget it. I’m not the one who’s desperate here.”

Despite the absurd premise of talking about reincarnation, the Cult Leader earnestly listened to what I had to say.

Or maybe... it was just because she believed this would be our last conversation.

Perhaps because of that context, she narrowed her eyes and said,

“If even a word of this leaks out, I’ll stake everything I have to kill you, Jin Yeomyung.”

“Are you talking to your past self with that threat?”

“Shut up! I’ll say it once, so listen carefully.”

Despite us being the only two alive in this vast Grand Pavilion, she deliberately used sound transmission to deliver her message.

—.....

“Oh.”

—.....

“Uh, hmm!”

—.....

“Ahem-hem!”

After about half a quarter of an hour of silent sound transmission, her face had turned red with embarrassment.

With a reluctant expression, I said,

“You really were something back in the day.”

“S-Shut up!”

Even with the experience of reincarnation, the grand saga of the Cult Leader’s youth left me speechless. It was that outrageous.

Of course, the issue was that it wasn’t in a positive direction.

“In any case, hearing about your stormy youth has been quite the revelation. I think it’ll help me later on...”

“Wait.”

Just when I thought she might finally be ready to kill me—

Her cold, stiff voice instantly turned the loosened atmosphere back to tension.

“It seems... our conversation ends here.”

“.....!”

“Uninvited guests have arrived at the entrance of the Heavenly Demon Pavilion.”

In other words—

All of our defenses had been broken by the righteous Murim Alliance’s assault.

The Cult Leader slowly rose from her seat.

And with a strange smile, she asked,

“So? Should I at least make your final moment a comfortable one?”

“I’ll pass. I’d rather die with every detail burned into my eyes.”

“Fufufu... is that so?”

With those words, the two of us waited quietly for our enemies to make their grand entrance.

Not long after—

The thick entrance of the Heavenly Demon Pavilion shattered, and hundreds of martial artists flooded in.

“To think I would live to witness the fall of the Demonic Cult in my lifetime. What a glorious day this is.”

At the lead stood an old man with sharp features and a lean build, his eyes glaring our way.

“Is that the Sword Supreme Sage?”

“Yes, Cult Leader.”

The Leader of the Righteous Murim Alliance—Sword Supreme Sage Gwan Hyun.

But he wasn’t the only one to catch our eye.

With a fierce smile, the Cult Leader glared at the person standing beside him.

“So, my loathsome husband returns.”

My eyes followed hers.

And at the end of that gaze—

Stood the Demonic Faction Lord, Han Mubaek.

Grin!

Even I had to admit it—Han Mubaek was devilishly handsome, and he simply flashed his brilliant white teeth in response.

I couldn’t take it and snapped at the Sword Supreme Saint.

“Alliance Leader, do you even know who you’re standing next to right now?”

“Of course!”

The Sword Supreme Saint answered with confidence and stepped forward, shouting.

“The Heavenly Divine Dragon has endured disgrace for the glory of the Central Plains! The world shall never forget his achievements and sacrifices!”

“Ha.”

“Heavenly Divine Dragon?”

Both the Cult Leader and I scoffed at the same time.

To think that, even while operating as the Demonic Faction Lord, he’d been making connections with the righteous side—and even picked up such a grandiose title!

“Your talent for manipulation is astounding. I’m honestly impressed.”

To that, Han Mubaek turned toward the Cult Leader and shouted ‘righteously.’

“Demonic Grandmaster, Heartless Demonic Empress! It’s time you paid for all the sins you’ve committed!”

She cocked her head to the side.

“Funny. Isn’t it rich for someone who once fed me a poison so deadly even the Tang Clan recoiled in fear, to talk about justice?”

“Everything I did was for the Central Plains.”

“You mean for the Heaven-Defying Society.”

Flinch!

Though he had been standing tall under her mocking tone, Han Mubaek’s shoulders twitched slightly.

The martial artists behind him tilted their heads in confusion.

“Heaven-Defying Society?”

“What’s that?”

Even I had never heard the name before. But Han Mubaek, with a visibly guilty face, shouted in a panic.

“Alliance Leader, everyone! Don’t be fooled by the witch’s lies. She’s trying to sow discord among us one last time with her wicked schemes!”

The Sword Supreme Saint stepped in to cover for him.

“Hrmm. That must be it. The words of the Demonic Cult are not even worth considering.”

“R-Right!”

“Yes, if even the Alliance Leader says so...”

Only then did the murmuring from the rear settle down.

Unfortunately, the key the Cult Leader had thrown to reveal his true identity had been brushed aside without a second thought.

And Han Mubaek... continued to wag his snake-like tongue.

“The Cult Leader’s life is already hanging by a thread. There’s no need for a one-on-one duel. Just strike with your full force and finish it.”

“Hmm...”

The Sword Supreme Saint hesitated slightly at those words.

Capturing the Cult Leader of the Demonic Cult—who was already as good as incapacitated—by himself would bring him unimaginable fame across the Central Plains.

Greed tempted him for a brief moment, but, as a well-trained Taoist from Mount Wudang, the Sword Supreme Saint overcame it.

As the enemies formed a wide encirclement, I clicked my tongue inwardly.

‘Tch.’

If they’d insisted on a one-on-one duel, we might’ve had a chance.

A shame.

“The man beside her is the Inner Administrator of the Demonic Cult. Taking him down would be another great achievement.”

Damn it.

Han Mubaek now turned his attention toward me.

I drew my sword as I stood by the Cult Leader’s side.

It was a treasured blade my father had tossed to me—saying to use it in place of my younger brother, who had become the family head.

The Cult Leader also drew her sword—the Heavenly Demon Sacred Sword, a holy relic of the Cult—and pointed it at the enemies.

“I may be poisoned and weakened, but someone like you isn’t beyond me. I can handle this on my own.”

“You boast too much, Cult Leader.”

“Do I? Whether it’s boasting or not, you’ll see for yourselves soon enough.”

Hwaruk!

The Heavenly Demon Sacred Sword left her hand, radiating a dark flame-like demonic energy.

The expressions of the Sword Supreme Saint and others hardened instantly.

“She still had that much strength left?!”

And that wasn’t the end.

The sword split into twelve blade shadows and began circling around her.

“Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword Art!”

If the Heavenly Demon Art was the greatest martial art of the demonic world, then the greatest sword technique was the Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword Art.

The Sword Supreme Saint, now flustered, drew his sword and gave the order to attack.

“Golden Dragon Heavenly Sword Squad! Attack the minions of the Demonic Cult!”

“Uwoooooh!”

From behind the Sword Supreme Saint, the elite force of the Murim Alliance—over two hundred members of the Golden Dragon Heavenly Sword Squad—charged toward us.

And thus,

Our final, life-or-death battle began.

* * *

Drip! Drip!

The sound of blood dripping from the wounds all over my body stirred my fading consciousness.

‘Ah... damn it.’

I knew exactly what was happening.

The return of consciousness before death.

My body, having reached the brink of death, was burning its final ember.

‘The Cult Leader... is she...?’

Though she had been poisoned by all manner of deadly toxins and couldn’t even exert a fraction of her original power—

It became clear why the Central Plains had once called her the Grandmaster of the Demonic Path.

Unleashing the Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword Art, she tore through two hundred of the Murim Alliance’s elite forces all by herself.

But I couldn’t witness it to the end.

Pathetically, I was taken down in mere seconds by Han Mubaek’s sword.

Crackle! Snap!

‘Something’s burning...’

The sound of splitting timbers and the acrid scent of smoke filled my nostrils.

My strength was gone. My vision blurred.

And through it all, a tired woman’s voice reached my ears.

“You still breathing, Jin Yeomyung?”

“Cult Leader?”

Instinctively, I turned toward the voice.

And I swallowed hard.

“I’m glad. At least I get to say goodbye before the end.”

The Cult Leader, Cheon Yura, smiled faintly.

But I couldn’t return the smile.

“C-Cult Leader...”

Her entire body was pierced with dozens of blades, including through her Dantian.

Her once neatly tied hair was matted with blood, undone and wild. Her once sharp yet graceful face was now slashed and mangled beyond recognition.

I gasped.

Is this what people meant when they said not even an immortal sage could save someone?

“They’ve retreated. I activated the self-destruction formation in the Heavenly Demon Pavilion, and they fled in a panic.”

“That’s... not the point, is it!?”

I used the last of my strength to push myself up and crawl toward her.

Watching me crawl to her, she spoke weakly but with a smile.

“Jin Yeomyung, you meant what you said earlier... didn’t you?”

“Yes, yes! I did. It wasn’t a lie. I wasn’t lying!”

I reached her side, sobbing as I cried out with everything I had.

“Then why are you crying like that?”

Cheon Yura slowly raised a hand and wiped under my eyes.

The tears disappeared for a moment—only for the smear of her dark blood to take their place.

I clenched my teeth.

“Still... I can’t help it. I’m sad.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. I swear it. I’ll avenge you. No matter what.”

And I meant it.

The ‘reincarnation’ I earned as a special reward for saving the previous world—

I had originally intended to use it to explore a different world.

But now, I would use it for revenge.

Maybe she sensed my determination through the venom in my voice.

Cheon Yura looked relieved as she raised her head.

“Then... I’m glad.”

Even in this state, she asked playfully,

“You’ll... seduce me, right?”

“.....”

I stared blankly at her face.

It sounded like a joke, but... no. In this moment, I knew she meant it from the bottom of her heart.

“Yes.”

“Good.”

Satisfied with my answer, she slowly closed her eyes, as if the strength had left her completely.

“I’m glad.”

And with that...

She moved no more.

And I, too, felt the final ember of life within me quietly flicker and fade.

Above our heads, the charred roof beams collapsed inward.

Boom!

This was the end of my life... in this world.

Chapter 3: First Young Master Jin Yeomyung (1)

To be honest, she wasn’t a good superior.

Perhaps it was because the prestige of the previous Cult Leader, who had earned the title of “Heavenly Demon,” was simply too overwhelming.

In order to escape the shadow of the previous Cult Leader, that woman had always reigned as an arrogant and violent tyrant.

Ah, don’t get me wrong. I didn’t just misspeak by calling her that woman.

You know how people curse out their king when no one's around? It's like that.

"Ah, damn it."

Frankly speaking, she had already shown signs of being rotten to the core ever since I first met her during her days as the Young Cult Leader.

She was the kind of person who would use anything at her disposal to maintain her position.

The reason I was appointed as the Inner Administrator had a lot to do with the Cult Leader's direct intervention.

She had aimed to keep the Heavenly Demon Pavilion and those bastards from the Cheon Clan, who had almost taken over the cult, in check.

Before Cheon Clan could claim the seat of Inner Administrator, she probably thought it was the right move to insert someone like me—who had no real martial arts skill but came from a powerful family—into the role.

"...Young Master, ...Young Master!"

In the end, her reform failed.

All because of that damn husband of hers, the only one she had ever trusted.

Well, I didn't exactly feel sorry for her.

After all, this was the Heavenly Demon Cult. A place of deadly struggle, where the weak couldn't survive.

She had merely struggled to survive in her own way. She had simply failed because she lacked the luck and the ability.

"...Young Master! Grand...Young Master!"

And yet, I couldn't get that face of hers—smiling foolishly at the very end—out of my mind.

How deep must her resentment have been for her to take my words so seriously?

Words that sounded like utter fantasy—about reincarnation.

So seriously...

...So seriously?

Gurgle! Glub!

No, I'm trying to have a serious flashback here—why the hell is it so hard to breathe?

Did I just get water up my nose?

The moment that thought crossed my mind, a familiar voice stabbed through my ears.

“Young Master Yeomyung!”

Puhwaaah!

And with another splash of water, I came to my senses.

“Damn it.”

I was sure the last scene of my life had been a burning beam about to smash my skull in.

Did I get doused with water to put out that fire?

“Young Master! You’re awake!”

“Ghh...!”

Sniff! Sniff!

I was still dazed.

I coughed harshly to get the water out of my nose.

After a moment, as I fully regained my senses, a much younger version of a familiar servant came into view.

“What the... Gu Chil?”

“Yes! I am your loyal servant, Gu Chil, Young Master!”

Whether in the past or the future, that smooth-looking face hadn’t changed a bit.

Gu Chil was a servant my father had assigned to me.

‘He had a lot more wrinkles on that forehead last time I saw him...’

It seemed the regression had worked properly.

‘Judging by that face, I’ve really gone back quite a bit, haven’t I?’

Wait—what the hell is that in his hand?

“Gu Chil.”

“Yes, sir?”

“What’s with that washbasin?”

“Ah! Th-that is...!”

Me, drenched like a drowned rat. And Gu Chil, holding a washbasin.

The situation was clear as day.

“I mean, you could’ve just shaken my shoulder to wake me up, you little—”

He could’ve just pressed my acupoint or something. Gu Chil should be capable of that, right?

“Th-that’s not it! That’s—!”

“What? Why are you so flustered?”

Gu Chil looked genuinely shaken by something.

This was the same guy who used to boast that, since he had no hair, he had nothing to fear in life—so it took a lot to rattle him.

“I was the one who ordered it.”

Gasp!

A heavy, middle-aged voice came from behind me.

A voice that, no matter how many times I heard it—whether in the past or the present—was familiar and yet never grew comfortable.

The moment I realized who it belonged to, my shoulders went stiff.

‘Shit. Don’t tell me...’

The joy of regression would have to wait.

I hastily fixed my posture and turned my gaze.

At the end of my gaze stood a massive man in an elaborate red robe, staring quietly in my direction.

“Ah, Fath—no, Patriarch.”

“Foolish brat.”

With eyes like a demon from the depths of hell, the long-haired giant glared at me.

Just making eye contact made my knees weak and my groin tighten in fear.

One of the Six Great Demonic Clans that ruled alongside the Cheon Clan over the Heavenly Demon Cult—this man was the current patriarch of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan and a Grand Elder of the Heavenly Demon Cult.

He was the Asura King, Jin Gun-ak.

Behind him stood the elite warriors of the clan, the Ten Stones of Demonic Heaven.

Jin Gun-ak picked up a bottle scattered nearby and said,

“A brat who hasn’t even undergone his coming-of-age ceremony snuck into a brothel and drank?”

Ah.

The moment I heard those words, I knew exactly at which point I had regressed.

I quickly crawled forward and knelt before my father, Jin Gun-ak.

“P-Patriarch. The thing is...”

“Silence.”

“Yes, sir.”

I shut my mouth. Saying the wrong thing here could literally cost me my head.

“Well, be that as it may.”

But from past experience, I knew this rage wasn’t just about a minor drinking offense.

“The firstborn of the Jin Clan—passed out from half a bottle of liquor?”

Yes. That was what Jin Gun-ak was truly angry about.

“...I apologize.”

“And at a drinking party with members of the other Six Great Clans, no less?”

“...I have no excuse.”

“You fool!”

This must have happened when I was seventeen.

Born with a golden spoon in my mouth, I had dreams of becoming the Casanova of the Demonic Cult, and I spent my days playing around without restraint.

As usual, during that time, I had been “exploring” the pleasure districts with friends and boldly stormed into the most prestigious brothel under the Heavenly Demon Cult.

And the result?

‘Looks like the others all got caught.’

Whether orthodox or unorthodox, all prestigious clans had absurdly strict rules.

Especially since we had brazenly entered Machunru, the top brothel in Miyok Castle, it wouldn’t have taken long for word of it to reach our main house.

‘Right, we were all caught by warriors dispatched from the main clan not even half an hour after we started drinking.’

And in my case, I was oh-so-honored to have none other than the patriarch of my clan personally show up to drag me out.

Of course, someone like the Asura King wouldn’t normally come out over something this trivial. He wasn’t even the type to care much about his children to begin with.

“You pathetic brat. And you call yourself my son, with such a weak constitution? Tsk tsk tsk!”

“.....”

Honestly, I felt wronged.

In my previous life—before I ended up in this medieval Murim world—I could drink like a fish.

Sure, I got cocky trusting in that, but who would've thought that I'd get knocked out after just half a bottle of liquor, even if it was distilled?

How was I supposed to know my body was this weak to alcohol!?

“If you’re weak in constitution, at least your brain should be sharp.”

I stayed quiet with my head bowed, despite Jin Gun-ak’s continued scolding.

Because I knew the real reason he had come here would soon come out.

“Do you have any idea why I came to apprehend you myself?”

“Of course, sir.”

Of course I did.

Humans are creatures of forgetfulness, but some events leave a deep enough impression to be remembered.

“It’s time for me to fulfill my duty as the firstborn of the clan, isn’t it?”

“Oh?”

Jin Gun-ak’s eyes curved with interest.

“Interesting. Speak it clearly from your own mouth—what is the reason?”

I cleared my throat a bit.

Last time, I couldn’t say it properly and ended up getting dragged home like a beaten dog.

But this time would be different.

“The exchange with the Young Cult Leader must have been finalized.”

“Hmph. So you’re not completely brainless after all.”

Exchange with the Young Cult Leader.

This referred to a meeting between Cheon Yura, who had been appointed the Young Cult Leader at the age of seventeen the previous year, and the heirs of the Six Great Demonic Clans, the most prestigious lineages of the cult.

In truth, it was more like a selection event for her future consort. Representatives from the Six Clans were selected to meet the Young Cult Leader in turn and interact with her over a set period.

‘The timing is perfect.’

Needless to say, I already knew the outcome of this event.

All the heirs of the Six Clans failed to handle Cheon Yura’s vicious temperament and ended up dropping out—or, like me, had no interest and let the meetings fizzle out.

Because she couldn’t find a match during this time, the Cult later expanded the candidate pool to the entire organization.

Eventually, this led to the Demonic Faction Lord Selection Tournament, where the winner would be the man who would doom the Cult to destruction: the traitor Han Mubaek.

‘I won’t let things play out that way this time.’

With my resolve firm, Jin Gun-ak spoke.

“The only reason you, a brat with neither talent nor drive, have been allowed to live this long is for this moment.”

Jin Gun-ak was never a kind father.

He was a ruthless man who would use even his own child as a tool if it served the glory of the clan.

“Of course, sir.”

“Well, well. How rare to see you so full of enthusiasm.”

Of course I was.

If I didn’t act now, the Cult would fall.

And so would my third life.

“The other Clans won’t hold back either. Their direct heirs are no pushovers. Can you win over the Young Cult Leader’s heart ahead of them?”

“The other heirs will never be able to win her heart.”

Jin Gun-ak gave a satisfied laugh at my bold declaration.

“Very well. If you’re that eager, I’ll overlook today’s disgrace.”

He stood up from his seat.

“I’ll coordinate the schedule with the Heavenly Demon Pavilion and inform you. Until then, behave yourself...”

For some reason, the corner of Jin Gun-ak’s mouth lifted ever so slightly.

“If you don’t want to bring shame to our family name, you’d best polish your self-defense skills.”

Damn it.

Of course Jin Gun-ak, a high-ranking elder of the cult, would know what kind of personality Cheon Yura had.

He might be a cold-hearted father, but this was probably his idea of a mischievous warning.

“I hope this father won’t be disappointed.”

I silently lowered my head in response.

In my previous life, disappointing my father had earned me a bitter punishment.

‘Well, this time, I won’t be letting you down.’

After all the playing around I did in my past life, I planned to act for real this time.

And with that, Jin Gun-ak left Machunru with his subordinates.

As befitting the ceremonial presence of a Patriarch of one of the Six Great Clans, the crowd on the street parted like the miracle of Moses.

I sat on the third-floor balcony, watching his retreating figure.

‘Whew, I didn’t expect to meet Father the moment I opened my eyes.’

Jin Gun-ak was, to me, an incredibly uncomfortable person.

I mean, when you live as a carefree playboy, you’d have to be shameless not to feel pressured by your parents’ gaze.

But aside from that, Jin Gun-ak was someone who had done his utmost to use me as a “tool” to strengthen his own power.

‘It’s a bit unsettling... Having no choice but to play the dutiful son.’

Still, to pull off whatever schemes I had in mind going forward, I’d need Jin Gun-ak’s cooperation at multiple turns.

I slowly calmed my thoughts.

‘It’s unusually quiet.’

This would normally be the time when a place like this was packed with guests. But because I had rented out the entire third floor in advance, only Gu Chil and I were here now.

‘The timing of this regression is perfect. Not ten, but twenty years ago—plenty of opportunities ahead.’

The Heaven-Defying Society, was it?

Looking at the faces of the ones who betrayed the cult alongside Han Mubaek, it was obvious many of them were already active during this period.

‘I’ll uproot every last one of them.’

Just as I was thinking that—

“Young Master! What on earth were you thinking, saying something like that to the Patriarch?!?”

Gu Chil suddenly burst out, practically scolding me.

“What now?”

“What do you mean ‘what’? Didn’t you boldly declare you’d become the Young Cult Leader’s consort?!?”

“When did I say that?”

“W-What? No, just earlier—”

“I never said I’d be the Young Cult Leader’s husband. I merely said the other heirs from the Six Clans would all be rejected by her.”

“H-how is that not the same thing?!?”

“It’s very different.”

At this point in time, Cheon Yura was utterly impossible to win over no matter what you did.

She was currently obsessed with perfecting her martial arts. To her, the participants in this exchange were nothing more than discarded pawns from the Six Clans, or vermin sent in hopes of clinging to power.

‘And since she wouldn’t even glance at someone weaker than her, she’d be even more impossible for the current me to handle.’

I let out a sigh and shook my head.

“That’s not something that can be decided by my will alone.”

“What do you mean—?”

Gu Chil was just about to argue back when—

From the entrance to the third floor, which had been quiet until now, someone’s voice rang out.

“Well, this is unexpected. I didn’t think you’d still be here.”

Both Gu Chil and I turned toward the source of the voice.

There stood a tall young man, looking a year or two older than me, with a handsome and refined expression.

‘Huh? That guy—’

Even if this was the past, that face wasn’t one I could ever forget.

“Ma Chulsoo?”

“What? Did I grow another head or something?”

“That’s not what I meant...”

The Heavenly Demon Cult had countless Clans, but only members of the The Blood Dragon Demonic Clan wore robes emblazoned with such a flashy red dragon.

‘Why is he suddenly showing up? Wait... now that I think about it...’

Yeah, he had been one of the participants in this gathering, hadn’t he?

I raised my hand in a mock-greeting, throwing the usual jab his way.

“Where’s Younghée? You came out alone?”

“Again with that crap! I told you, I don’t have a little sister named Younghée!”

Honestly, I was the only one on the entire Central Plains who got that joke, but I still tossed that line every time I saw Ma Chulsoo.

“So, what do you want with me? I thought you got dragged off by your clan too. Looks like you slipped away, huh?”

“Hmph! I’m just here to finish my business and go.”

Shrrring!

The guy who said he’d just finish his business suddenly drew the sword at his waist.

Then pointed its tip directly at me.

“I challenge you to a duel.”

...Seriously? Just like that?

Chapter 4: First Young Master Jin Yeomyung (2)

There was no doubt that Ma Chulsoo and I were entangled in quite a persistent and nasty fate.

Not only during our youth.

Even when I held the position of Inner Administrator, that guy was one of the rising elders of the cult’s progressive faction and constantly opposed me as a political rival.

However.

He had never shown up so suddenly and without any sense of decorum like this.

‘This kind of situation never happened in the past, though?’

I was a bit dumbfounded by the future veering off course right from the beginning.

But after a bit of thought, the answer came to me immediately.

‘Ah, it must be because of Father.’

In my previous life, I hadn't properly informed Jin Gun-ak about the exchange ceremony with the Young Cult Leader, which led to me getting beaten to a pulp and dragged back to the main family.

But in this life, I'd already overcome that crisis, so this unexpected fork in the road was one I'd never encountered before.

'No, fork or whatever—why is that guy suddenly pointing a sword at me?'

"Shall I kill him, Young Master?"

In an instant, Gu Chil stepped in front of me and exuded murderous intent.

But I grabbed Gu Chil's shoulder and shoved him aside.

"Put away your killing intent and stand down."

"But—!"

"Don't you realize things will only get more complicated if you step in?"

Gu Chil, who usually came across as a bit of a fool, was my servant.

But in truth, his identity was that of a former top-class assassin, once known by the epithets White-Faced Human Slayer and Doom-Wielding Ghost Commander. In other words, he served as both my servant and bodyguard.

"There are probably guards from the Ma Clan nearby as well. If you make a move, they'll act too. Then this won't just be between me and him—it'll turn into a full-on conflict between our two clans."

"Ah..."

"If you understand, then stay still. I'll handle this."

Only after I said that did Gu Chil quietly step back.

But his eyes were still burning with the will to intervene at any moment.

I stepped forward toward Ma Chulsoo.

Every second should be spent carefully planning the future.

Wasting time on a guy like this was far too inefficient.

“Hey, friend, I was just teasing a bit. Did that really make you mad enough to draw a sword?”

“Since when were you my friend?”

Although six great families existed at the peak of the Heavenly Demon Cult under the name of the Six Great Demonic Clans, that didn’t mean they were all on friendly terms.

For example, the Jin Clan of Demonic Heaven, to which I belonged, had a close relationship with the Hidden Shadow Bright Clan.

Whereas Ma Chulsoo’s Blood Dragon Demonic Clan was one we were constantly at each other’s throats with—just about ready to devour one another.

“And I didn’t challenge you to a martial duel because of something so petty. I’m not that narrow-minded.”

Yeah right. The ones who say that kind of thing are usually the most petty.

“You haven’t forgotten that personal duels between members of the Six Clans are forbidden, have you?”

“Of course not. But every rule has exceptions.”

“Exceptions, huh.”

There were three exceptions that allowed duels between members of the Six Clans.

One, when the fate of the family was on the line.

Two, when an official martial arts tournament was held by the cult.

And the last one...

“This is because of the Young Cult Leader, isn’t it?”

“That’s right.”

When it came to matters related to the Cheon Clan.

Only then did I fully understand why Ma Chulsoo was acting like this.

“There’s only one thing I want. If you lose in our duel, I want you to give up on the exchange ceremony with the Young Cult Leader.”

Instead of replying, I paused to think.

‘So that’s why this bastard came to the banquet in the first place.’

In fact, things had gone wrong in my previous life.

‘That’s right, wasn’t that guy’s younger brother one of the candidates for this exchange ceremony?’

I was pretty sure his name was Ma Jinyoon.

I clicked my tongue inwardly.

‘Tsk tsk, things don’t seem so great in the Ma Clan either. Maybe even worse than us?’

Despite his clan’s internal situation, this guy was surprisingly affectionate.

Unlike me, who already knew I’d be rejected by everyone, this guy—who didn’t know—must have been doing everything he could to match his brother with Cheon Yura.

Still, his personal reasons had nothing to do with me.

“And why should I go along with your selfish demands?”

As if he had been waiting for that, Ma Chulsoo put on a deliberately fake smile.

“Hmph, so you’re backing down?”

“How dare that bastard!”

Gu Chil again emitted killing intent from behind, but I raised a hand to stop him.

I wasn’t some amateur who’d get provoked by something so trivial.

I too smirked at Ma Chulsoo and threw back my own provocation.

“If you’ve got nothing to be afraid of, why not compete fairly? Why pull underhanded stunts like this? Or is that all your precious brother’s skills and character amount to?”

“You son of a bitch!”

Sure enough, with just a little provocation, the young Ma Chulsoo flew into a rage.

Well, he was still in his adolescence, after all—even if he was a direct descendant of one of the Six Clans.

With a powerful backing like his, his stormy, rebellious phase would probably last longer.

There was no way he could endure this kind of provocation.

‘I can guess why he’s acting like this.’

Unlike Ma Chulsoo, who would become the head of the Ma Clan in the future, his younger brother Ma Jinyoon never really stood out.

In fact, I’d heard that Ma Jinyoon’s talent was so poor that he could barely be considered a direct descendant of the Ma Clan.

Most critically, under the tacit approval of the clan head, the Ma Clan was one of the worst when it came to brutal power struggles between siblings.

This entire conflict was just Ma Chulsoo’s youthful desperation to create a future for his cherished younger brother.

But that didn’t mean I had any obligation to comply.

“Stop wasting your time and go. Unless you want a childish scuffle to blow up into a war between adults.”

“Grrr! Don’t you dare look down on me, Jin Yeomyung!”

Perhaps genuinely enraged, Ma Chulsoo forgot his original purpose and began to charge at me.

‘Ah, for crying out loud.’

If even one of us got injured here, things wouldn’t just end quietly.

Since we were both direct descendants of the Six Clans, it could seriously lead to all-out war between families.

‘Damn it. Why do I have to fight a pointless battle that gains me nothing?’

I waved my hand at Gu Chil, signaling for him to back off.

“Don’t you dare step in.”

“Y-Young Master? But you don’t even know martial arts—what are you going to do!?”

“What else? I’m going to subdue him.”

“S-Subdue him!?”

“And the rest of you hiding back there, stay put as well.”

I shouted toward Ma Chulsoo's hidden escorts, then leapt into his offensive assault.

'Well then, time to shake off some rust.'

My emotions settled, and my senses awakened.

Even though I had reincarnated into the world of Murim, I had deliberately refrained from awakening my body's potential.

As the saying goes, "a needle cannot be hidden in a sack"—if word got out that I had talent, it would only get in the way of living the carefree life I wanted.

But now, things were different.

"You bastard!"

A faint red glow emanated from Ma Chulsoo's sword.

'That's the well-honed Blood Flow Demonic Spirit Sword Art.'

It was the Ma Clan's pride—a top-class sword art consisting of seven primary forms and forty-two variations.

In terms of depth, it could even be compared to the sword arts of Wudang or Mount Hua in the Central Plains without falling short.

'If it were the sword of Ma Chulsoo, the future head of the Ma Clan, I wouldn't stand a chance—but this is the sword of the teenage Ma Chulsoo. That's a whole different story.'

We were roughly twenty years before the final moment of my past life.

So the sword techniques of this current Ma Chulsoo posed no real threat to me, now that I had awakened my senses.

Sha-sha-shak!

Brilliant red arcs blurred my vision.

However—

'I can see it.'

As if time had slowed, I immediately read the path of Ma Chulsoo's slashing sword.

Tup!

I reached out and caught the blade, which had been tracing a menacing arc, with just two fingers.

“Gah!”

“Y-You insane bastard!”

Ma Chulsoo was appalled.

When I boldly reached out to his strike, he had assumed my wrist would be sliced off. He never imagined I’d actually *catch* the blade!

“C-Catching a sword with bare hands!”

A shocked voice echoed from behind. Likely one of Ma Chulsoo’s hidden bodyguards.

Before they could step in, I rushed straight into Ma Chulsoo’s chest and struck his Demonic Vein.

“Ugh!”

With just one blow, Ma Chulsoo’s pressure point was subdued, and he dropped his sword in agony.

“Guhk! Kah!”

His face contorted in humiliation.

Forget the pain—being subdued barehanded by a boy his own age, and from a rival clan’s successor, no less, was an extreme disgrace!

But I had no intention of sparing Ma Chulsoo’s pride.

“What a damn nuisance.”

With that, my right foot delivered a finishing blow aimed directly at Ma Chulsoo’s lower region (!).

Thunk!

“Kk—gh!”

For a brief instant, I saw the blood vessels burst in Ma Chulsoo’s eyes.

Thud!

Just as that pain was about to reach his brain, one of his bodyguards finally intervened.

Thanks to that, Ma Chulsoo was able to pass out before he could even process the agony.

“Wh-What in the world was that?”

Gu Chil genuinely debated whether what he had just witnessed was real or some kind of hallucination.

Just yesterday, this First Young Master who avoided martial arts like the plague had suddenly displayed such overwhelming prowess?

“Hmph.”

Whether Gu Chil was stunned or not, I waved a hand at the guard supporting Ma Chulsoo.

“Take him. Thank goodness there were no witnesses.”

Just then, two masked figures clad in blood-red martial robes dropped down from the ceiling.

They looked at me with newfound eyes as they tended to the unconscious Ma Chulsoo.

One of them cupped his fist toward me.

“Thank you for resolving this matter peacefully, Young Master.”

“No need for thanks. Once he wakes up, he’s going to go berserk. You’d better be ready for that.”

“...Understood.”

“You really better be ready. You wouldn’t want to see what happens if I start talking.”

“.....”

“Oh, one last thing. I don’t think anything’s broken. I did hold back a bit.”

I couldn’t see his face behind the mask, but for some reason, I could just feel that his expression was horribly twisted.

After all, if the Jin Clan ended up blocking the Ma Clan’s heir from producing an heir of his own... that’d be a big problem, wouldn’t it?

I'd definitely have to prevent that, right?

South of Gansu Province, nestled in the Ten Thousand Great Mountains, was the headquarters of the Heavenly Demon Cult—the most powerful singular force in all of the Central Plains, composed of five great Divisions, nine Sectors, seventeen Halls, and thirty-four martial units.

Just within the main stronghold alone, the cult housed a total population of 200,000. Of these, 70,000 were combat-capable warriors. When you included followers stationed in branch outposts and secret strongholds (*biji*) throughout the Central Plains, the total number of adherents surpassed 500,000.

This enormous faction was none other than the Heavenly Demon Cult.

The ruling elite of this cult was comprised of seven families in total.

There was the Cheon Clan, direct descendants of the First Heavenly Demon, revered as divine beings and the object of worship for all cult followers—

And the *Six Great Demonic Clans*, founded by the six disciples of that First Heavenly Demon—collectively known as the Six Great Demonic Clans.

In particular, within the Ten Thousand Great Mountains, the influence of the Cheon Clan was absolute. Unless something was truly extraordinary, nothing that happened within the mountain escaped their notice.

In other words—

Even a minor incident like the one that had just taken place within the cult's main fortress would undoubtedly reach the ears of the Cheon Clan in no time.

“Huff, huff!”

Within one of the domains of the Cheon Clan—Lesser Demon Hall, the residence of the Young Cult Leader.

In this vast place resembling an inner fortress, a young girl was violently swinging her sword.

She was at that delicate age, just barely shedding the innocence of childhood and beginning to reveal signs of maturity.

Had anyone witnessed the black sword aura rippling from the blade in her hands, they would've surely been struck dumb with disbelief.

“Young Cult Leader.”

The girl, called the Young Cult Leader*, was Cheon Yura. When a subordinate suddenly appeared from thin air, she calmly withdrew her sword.

“What is it?”

“Well...”

The subordinate cautiously relayed a piece of freshly acquired intelligence to her young mistress.

“Jin Yeomyung of the Jin Clan defeated Ma Chulsoo of the Ma Clan in a single blow? With his bare hands?”

“Yes, according to the report from the Divine Ghost Unit.”

Cheon Yura wiped the sweat from her brow with a silk cloth, her expression darkening.

“And why are you reporting this to me?”

Her subordinate began to sweat nervously, sensing her superior’s displeasure.

“Jin Yeomyung of the Jin Clan is one of the candidates for the upcoming exchange ceremony. There was an order to keep the Young Cult Leader informed of any recent developments regarding the candidates.”

A scoff curled at the corner of Cheon Yura’s lips.

“The Cult Leader is being overly cautious. All the candidates this time are just hollow, showy shells, aren’t they?”

The unexpectedly cynical response left the subordinate momentarily at a loss for words, head lowered in embarrassment.

“They are all Young Masters befitting the name of the Six Great Clans...”

Of course, she knew better than anyone that those words were nothing more than empty flattery.

“Fine, whatever. So, this one’s name is Jin Yeomyung?”

“Yes, the eldest son of the Asura King.”

“Hmph, I heard he was a discarded child. Guess that wasn’t quite true, huh?”

“Ma Chulsoo gained recognition early on at Thousand-Day Pass and made a name for himself among the Six Demonic Dragons as a rising prodigy. Even if it’s somewhat exaggerated, the fact that such rumors exist at all means...”

“Ugh, enough. I’ve heard all I need.”

Cheon Yura waved her hand dismissively, clearly annoyed.

“Whoever shows up, I have no intention of taking a husband.”

“Young Cult Leader, that goes against the wishes of the Cult Leader.”

“I have no desire to be a puppet of the Six Great Clans.”

Chwaaak!

With a horizontal swing of her sword, black energy surged once again.

“At the very least, until I complete my martial arts, I won’t allow anyone at my side.”

Assuming a stance, the young girl launched into a technique.

It was a sword art that, within the entire Heavenly Demon Cult, was the only one allowed to bear the name of Heaven-Slaying —the Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword.

Chwajajak!

Six precise sword traces tore through the walls of the training hall—an attack so refined it was hard to believe it came from someone not yet of age.

The subordinate’s eyes widened in astonishment.

‘The Young Cult Leader’s sword technique has already reached the realm of Six-Form Mastery!’

At this level, she could be considered a Master Level martial artist in the Murim world. If gauged purely by her potential, she could very well carry the title of the best under heaven in due time.

“Heh, who knows.”

Staring at the wall she had just split apart, Cheon Yura murmured,

“If someone turns up who can withstand that technique properly, then... maybe I wouldn’t mind at least having a conversation.”

“.....”

But was that even possible?

The subordinate could say with confidence: not just among the exchange ceremony candidates, but among all the youths of the Heavenly Demon Cult—no one under the age of twenty could possibly withstand that strike.

‘Ugh...!’

The subordinate silently offered condolences to the six Young Masters of the Six Great Clans, who were clearly headed for an all-too-predictable future.

Chapter 5: First Young Master Jin Yeomyung (3)

Among the Ten Thousand Mountains, eight peaks boasted the largest territories—these were the Eight Demon Peaks.

Nested within one of those peaks was the main residence of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan. But to call it a mere residence would be an understatement—it was so vast and majestic that it was more fitting to call it a fortress.

“Welcome, First Young Master!”

“Welcome, First Young Master!”

As Gu Chil and I reached the entrance of the main residence, a massive gate, towering over five jang tall, opened wide, and hundreds of martial artists and servants greeted us.

“Mm.”

I waved them off casually and passed through the entrance of the fortress.

Then a middle-aged man, with an impressive goatee, rushed toward me.

“Welcome back, First Young Master. I hope your outing with your friends went well?”

“Chief Administrator Byeok.”

Chief Administrator Byeok Jisang.

He was the one to whom Father, Jin Gun-ak, had entrusted full authority—a central figure who managed the clan’s internal affairs.

I purposely gave him a half-hearted smile.

“Went well? You jest, Chief Byeok.”

As if anything could’ve gone well when Father came all the way to Macheonru in Miyo Fortress—ten li away—to catch me himself?

“I was only worried for you, First Young Master...”

“Forget it.”

I cut him off.

“Just get me a training chamber.”

“Pardon? A training chamber!?”

His eyes widened like saucers.

What, was he pretending not to hear me? Did I say something I shouldn’t have?

But Chief Byeok blinked in genuine confusion, as if I truly had said something outrageous.

“Th-the Master’s private training chamber is currently being used by the Second Young Master for closed-door training...”

“Even a regular one is fine. Oh, and bring me a few martial arts scrolls from the clan’s martial arts repository. I’ll tell you which ones.”

“W-what!? You intend to train in martial arts!?”

It wasn’t just Chief Byeok who reacted in shock—many around us who had been watching were equally startled.

What the hell?

“Do I look like I’d ask for a training chamber for fun? Quit provoking me before I really lose my temper.”

“M-my apologies, First Young Master.”

Chief Byeok quickly bowed his head.

No matter how much power he wielded in the clan, I was still the First Young Master.

Especially since the heir to the clan hadn’t been officially chosen yet, he couldn’t afford to antagonize me carelessly.

Sure, I had lived a lazy life, but I wasn't a total delinquent, so my relationships within the clan were still manageable.

I relayed a list of martial arts I wanted to learn to Chief Byeok through a sound transmission technique.

"Hmm, these are..."

"What? Is it not possible?"

"Of course not. Unless they are ones the Clan Leader has marked as forbidden, there is nothing in the Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan that the First Young Master isn't allowed to learn. It's just..."

Chief Byeok tilted his head with an uncertain expression.

"They might be too weak, perhaps? Even if mastered, those stored in the Jin Martial Repository won't emit a destructive demonic aura."

Weak? Is that what he really thought?

I barely managed to hold back the urge to lash out.

"No, this level is just right."

"If that's the case, I'll have them delivered immediately."

"Good."

With that, Chief Byeok hurried away with quick steps.

Gu Chil, who had been looking uneasy this whole time, finally spoke up.

"Y-young Master. What are you planning to do?"

"What do you mean, what am I planning to do? Weren't you listening?"

"You're seventeen years old, Young Master... starting martial arts training now won't really change—"

"You little—!"

I smacked the back of Gu Chil's head, channeling my irritation into the blow.

Smack!

“Ugh!”

I glared at him as he bent forward from the impact.

“Me training in martial arts doesn’t mean I’m going to toss you off to the Ghost-Slaying Unit, so shut your mouth.”

“L-loyalty!”

Even though the strike must’ve hurt, Gu Chil’s eyes sparkled as he stood at attention with a salute.

“The fact that you’re saying crap like that even after watching me deal with Ma Chulsoo proves you really are Chief Byeok’s son.”

Like father, like son—two-faced through and through.

Gu Chil gave a sheepish laugh.

“Hehehe, I only ever think of serving you with utmost devotion, Young Master.”

I scoffed.

“Whatever. Just stand guard outside the training chamber.”

With that, I turned to head toward the chamber.

“Um, Young Master.”

“What now?”

“Why... are you really trying to train in martial arts again?”

“.....”

Unlike before, Gu Chil now looked quite serious.

We’d known each other since I was ten. Honestly, he was more like an older brother than a servant.

So when possible, I tried to tell him the truth—whether it was about the future, or the present.

With my hands clasped behind my back, I looked up at the sky and spoke.

“If I want to pretend I’m barely holding on, I figure I need to put in some effort.”

“Excuse me?”

“And to be honest... I’m not too confident in seduction, so I want to do everything else I can instead.”

What did I even know about dating?

“.....??”

Gu Chil tilted his head slightly. That expression clearly said, ‘What the hell are you talking about?’

“Heh.”

Well, that’s all he needed to know.

It’s not like I expected him to understand anyway.

I said no more and turned fully toward the training chamber.

The martial arts of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan focused on fist and palm techniques, and the body techniques derived from them.

They were destructive and domineering. The clan’s martial arts perfectly represented the classic traits of demonic martial arts—overwhelming output to crush opponents with sheer force.

‘The problem is, none of it really suits me.’

Even in my previous life, when I barely reached First-rate level, I chose to wield a sword rather than follow the clan’s martial arts.

That hadn’t changed now.

- Flying Heaven Infinite Divine Art

- Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Swords

The rest of the martial arts included a few supplementary techniques for light movement and support, but the two main ones I had to master were right in front of me.

I stared at the secret manuals laid before me, sinking into thought.

‘Will these really be enough?’

These two martial arts were none other than the ones I had trained in during my past life.

‘Master swore that if I could master these properly, I’d become invincible under the heavens.’

The master who had taught me these arts had once said so.

The Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Swords was one of the greatest sword techniques of the Cult, rivaling even the Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword of the Cheon Clan.

And the Flying Heaven Infinite Divine Art allowed me to accumulate Qi faster than most demonic arts, yet its stability was comparable to the internal cultivation techniques of orthodox sects.

The reason these arts never saw the light of day was, according to my master, because they fell into the hands of the ignorant and backwards Jin Clan of the Demonic Heaven.

Well, I had to admit, the “ignorant” part was kind of true. That was roughly the way the other clans of the Six Great Demonic Clans viewed the Jin Clan anyway.

The reason I specifically sought out the secret manuals of the martial arts I had already learned in my past life was simple.

‘Master said the originals were lost, and he could only pass on fragments to me.’

In other words, the versions I had learned in my past life were incomplete.

And now, right before my eyes, were the original, unabridged versions of those techniques.

‘Was it about four years from now? The time when the clan’s archives burned down?’

If I remembered correctly, that incident happened not long after I came of age.

There had been a massive fire at the main estate.

Caused, supposedly, by the negligence of a servant, the fire wasn’t extinguished in time and ended up consuming nearly a third of the estate.

Eventually, it even reached the martial arts repository where these manuals had been kept, burning everything to ashes.

In the end, Father Jin Gun-ak, enraged, had the servant and his entire family executed, and replaced everyone involved in the incident.

‘There was no concrete evidence, but many suspected it was no accident.’

Still, that wasn’t relevant right now. The incident hadn’t happened yet.

What mattered now was that the original manuals—those same ones my master had grieved over—were now in my hands.

‘With these, I can grow far stronger than I ever was in my past life.’

Thanks to being born into a great clan, I had excellent talent, perception, and ample internal energy.

But the clan’s martial arts didn’t suit me, and my utter lack of motivation meant I missed the critical window to achieve true mastery.

‘That was what always pained Master the most.’

I hadn’t thought much of it in my past life, but now, in hindsight, I felt a twinge of guilt.

I looked up at the ceiling of the training chamber.

‘Master, I don’t know whether we’ll meet again in this life, but I’ll become the Grandmaster you always dreamed of.’

Five years.

I was planning to bury myself in this place and train in martial arts for at least five years.

Sure, you might wonder how I intended to do that when the exchange ceremony with Cheon Yura was still on the horizon.

But it was doable.

Because I was planning to sabotage the exchange ceremony from the start.

‘The day I failed the exchange ceremony, Father locked me up for a year.’

When that confinement ended, I was stripped of my position as First Young Master, and the title of Young Clan Leader passed to my younger brother, Jin Yeoun.

It wasn’t exactly a pleasant memory, but I planned to make the most of that future.

‘This time, I’ll make sure they lock me up for five years instead.’

Even if I were confined, it wasn’t like I’d lose access to food, shelter, or freedom within the premises. So I was thinking of dragging out the sentence on purpose.

The title of First Young Master or Young Clan Leader? My little brother could have them for all I cared.

The Heaven-Defying Society? Even if they were currently clinging to the main sect like parasites, if I lacked personal strength, I'd hit a wall no matter how many tricks I pulled.

Even if it cost me a little now, the right answer was to increase my strength.

'Apologies, Cult Leader, but I don't think I'll be able to keep that promise to seduce you.'

As a fellow human being, I couldn't deny that I had been drawn to Cheon Yura in the past.

But love was another matter entirely.

I simply didn't have the confidence to pierce through her temperament and the current situation to win her over.

'It's far easier to train and fulfill the purpose of my reincarnation.'

My goal in this second life was simple.

I would dedicate myself to martial arts for five years until I reached a superhuman realm.

Then, I would head to the Central Plains and seize all the achievements Han Mubaek—the Demonic Faction Lord—had brought back to the main sect.

Along the way, I'd uncover and annihilate the true identity of the Heaven-Defying Society, the very force that had driven the cult to ruin.

'If I wipe out all the hidden threats to the Heavenly Demon Cult, then even if she becomes the Cult Leader, her rule won't be shaken.'

That was when it happened.

— I'm glad.

Flinch!

For some reason, her final words and expression from that day resurfaced in my mind.

But—

I shook my head forcefully.

'I can't do anything about that. Unless she turns her back on the cult entirely, she'll never escape the fate of being the Young Cult Leader.'

In the end, this was the best I could do.

Comforting myself with that thought, I slowly opened the first page of the martial arts manual.

For some reason, my chest felt a little tight.

Half a month passed.

"Graaaagh!"

A young man holding a small sword rolled disgracefully across the floor.

Watching him, a woman with sharp features coldly rebuked him.

"The sword technique from the Pa Clan in the last round was better than this. At least that one had some bite to it."

The young man, who had been overwhelmed in less than ten seconds, cried out in disbelief.

"H-how can this be?! How did you break through the Biheon Stealth Technique of the main clan so easily?!"

"Isn't it obvious? Your skill was just that pathetic."

Whack!

A lightning-fast kick flew toward him.

The last thing So Jeongbang, a direct descendant of the Hidden Shadow So Clan, saw that day was that woman's foot coming at him.

Thud!

With a single blow, she knocked So Jeongbang unconscious. Then, turning to her attendant standing nearby, she asked,

"Biyeon, who's next?"

The attendant respectfully bowed and replied,

“Next is Master Ma Jinyoon of the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan.”

“Looks like we’re almost done. Is he the last one?”

“No, there’s still Master Jin Yeomyung of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan.”

“Oh, the one who supposedly defeated the second son of the Ma Clan?”

The woman—Cheon Yura—clicked her tongue slightly.

“Just as I expected. These guys all have big family names but no substance. I wonder if this Jin Yeomyung will be any different?”

“Hard to say.”

The expression on the attendant, Biyeon’s, face subtly changed.

That was because among the ‘nobodies’ Cheon Yura had just insulted, one of them happened to be her cousin.

“Well, I’ll be meeting him soon anyway, so whatever. Let the next one in. I want to finish this quickly and get back to training.”

“Yes, Young Cult Leader.”

Biyeon bowed deeply.

Chapter 6: Young Cult Leader Exchange Ceremony (1)

Half a month.

It was a short period of time to achieve something.

But it was enough to reflect on myself and examine what I lacked.

After that fifteen-day period of cultivation came to an end—

“I believe you’ll do well.”

“Please have faith in me, Clan Head.”

Dressed impeccably, I departed from the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan, receiving the honor of a personal send-off from the clan head, Jin Gun-ak.

It was because the Young Cult Leader Exchange Ceremony was scheduled for today, right at the beginning of the noon hour.

“I’m saying this just in case, but if you disgrace the name of the clan, I will absolutely not let it slide.”

“.....Of course.”

The mindset I had—full of plans to completely wreck the exchange ceremony—was already half-dissolved.

Leaving behind such a chilling threat, I made my way toward Heavenly Demon Peak, the highest peak of Ten Thousand Mountains, where the Heavenly Demon Hall was located.

Perhaps it was because I was taking my time too leisurely, but Gu Chil grew anxious and tried to hurry me along.

“Y-Young Master, aren’t your steps a bit too slow?”

“Why are you nervous? I’m the one meeting the Young Cult Leader.”

“I-It’s because I’m worried!”

It wasn’t just Gu Chil—dozens of the Jin Clan’s household guards, mobilized to uphold the clan’s dignity, all wore similarly uneasy expressions.

“The Clan Head said I’m the last one in the schedule, so I won’t be late even if I take it slow.”

“E-Even so, you can’t take a Cheon Clan event so lightly!”

“It’s fine. I’ll deal with the consequences.”

With that stern reply, I continued at my own pace, admiring the scenery along the way.

There was, in fact, a reason for my delay.

‘There’s no way she’d look favorably on a man who shows up early.’

I was heading there just to get rejected—was there any need to be punctual about it?

Time passed, and I eventually crossed the entrance to Cheonmabong and arrived at Lesser Demon Hall, where the Young Cult Leader was staying.

“Go in.”

Naturally, the eyes of the Guardians standing watch at Lesser Demon Hall weren’t kind to a latecomer.

The moment I stepped into Lesser Demon Hall—

Crash!

The intact entrance of Lesser Demon Hall suddenly exploded before my eyes, splinters of the door flying past me as something was flung out.

“As far as welcome greetings go, that’s pretty aggressive.”

Gu Chil responded grimly to my remark.

“That’s not a welcome greeting—someone just got thrown out.”

“I know. I was joking.”

My eyes didn’t miss the boy who had been flung out with the shattered door.

Blood Dragon Demonic Clan.

Unless that bloodstained uniform was purely decorative, the boy’s crimson martial outfit clearly belonged to the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan.

Which meant—

‘Ma Jinyoon, it’s been a long time.’

His appearance was more that of a boy than a youth.

He looked exactly as I remembered him. Honestly, this would be the last time I ever saw Ma Jinyoon, so of course he hadn’t changed in my memory.

“Huff, huff!”

Still baby-faced, Ma Jinyoon was drenched in sweat, gripping the Blood Dragon Sword—the symbol of his clan.

His eyes were fixed solely on one place—inside the doorway.

“Well, at least this one’s kind of decent.”

A cheerful female voice rang out from within.

“.....!”

At the sound of that voice, my steps faltered.

It hadn't even been a month.

But already, the longing was crushing my chest.

Her voice sounded far more lively than it had back then.

"He's a hundred times better than the trash I've seen until now. Can you keep going?"

"Of course, Young Cult Leader!"

Ma Jinyoon, eyes blazing, hurled himself back into the doorway.

And not long after, the sound of clashing swords rang out violently.

I made sure to grumble and put on a deliberately sour expression.

"Damn, looks like I didn't manage to be late."

"You can say that in this situation?!"

Ignoring Gu Chil's reproach, I smirked.

"Whatever. Let's just enjoy the show."

As I stepped slowly toward the entrance, I couldn't help but think—

'Something's off.'

Setting aside the longing brought on by reuniting with Cheon Yura, the scene before me felt strange.

Ma Jinyoon was attacking Cheon Yura with everything he had.

Judging by how things looked, he couldn't even brush her sleeves—but in my memory, Ma Jinyoon never charged at her this recklessly.

More importantly—

'What the hell? Was Ma Jinyoon ever this good?'

The Ma Jinyoon I remembered was a dropout who got knocked out by Cheon Yura in one blow and ended up sprawled on the ground in disgrace.

I never saw him again after that.

But this? What the hell was I looking at?

“Haaaap!”

He executed the Blood Flow Demonic Spirit Sword Art that Ma Chulsoo had once shown me—it flowed smoothly toward Cheon Yura.

The level wasn’t far behind that of Ma Chulsoo.

“Hahaha! Not bad!”

Cheon Yura genuinely enjoyed herself as she received Ma Jinyoon’s onslaught.

A mere ten seconds passed in a flash.

Cheon Yura’s counterattacks began to grow increasingly fierce.

“Huff, huff!”

But Ma Jinyoon, already covered in wounds, was reaching his physical limit.

“What? Don’t tell me this is all you’ve got?”

“Rrrgh!”

Stung by Cheon Yura’s light provocation, Ma Jinyoon gritted his teeth and launched a desperate strike.

The form was from the Blood Flow Demonic Spirit Sword Art—Flying Blood Bullet Form, a sharp thrust hurtling forward.

Whoosh!

But Ma Jinyoon, whose stamina had run dry, sliced only air.

Cheon Yura didn’t miss the opening—she struck his wrist with the back of her sword.

With his weapon flying from his hand, she then delivered a powerful kick to his abdomen.

“Gah!”

A pained scream rang in my ears.

“Young Master!”

“A-Are you alright?!”

Servants from the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan, waiting nearby, rushed over to the crumpled Ma Jinyoon.

“I-I’m fine.”

Ma Jinyoon forced a smile as he tried his best to ease his expression in front of his clan’s retainers.

From a distance, I watched him with growing interest.

‘He’s got considerable martial talent.’

No—in fact, considering his age, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to call him a genius.

‘Even when his stamina was depleted, the sharpness of his sword never dulled.’

Though his speed had dropped, the edge of his blade remained unshaken.

In other words, Ma Jinyoon’s focus surpassed the limits of ordinary men.

‘So why didn’t someone like him ever stand out?’

No, wait—in my past life, didn’t he get humiliated without even being able to resist?

That was when—

“Jin Yeomyung!”

Ma Jinyoon spotted me and, for some reason, began glaring at me with outright hostility.

‘Huh?’

He sprang to his feet, his face openly twisted in enmity as he marched toward me.

‘What is this?’

I hadn’t even exchanged a single word with him in this life, had I?

Ma Jinyoon shouted toward me as I stood there, bewildered.

“I will never lose to you!”

“...Hmm?”

Throwing that line at me with a fiery gaze, Ma Jinyoon turned sharply back around and returned to Cheon Yura.

“.....??”

Whether I was dumbfounded or not, the guy grabbed his sword in reverse grip and bowed politely to Cheon Yura.

“It was an honor to witness your skill, Young Cult Leader.”

Cheon Yura nodded in response to his respectful farewell.

“I hope you’ve progressed further the next time we cross swords.”

“Ah! Th-Thank you very much!”

It seemed that Ma Jinyoon in this life had earned her approval.

If memory served, no one had ever made it to a second encounter with her before.

“You don’t seem to have any internal injuries, but you’ve got some visible ones. Go to the Medicine Hall for treatment.”

“Thank you for your concern, Young Cult Leader!”

With a respectful fist salute, Ma Jinyoon left Lesser Demon Hall alongside his retainers.

Even as he exited, he didn’t stop glaring daggers at me.

‘What the hell is that about?’

Had I done something to incur his grudge in this life?

I scratched the back of my head, deep in thought.

Or at least, I was about to be—until...

“So you’re the last one.”

A chilling voice struck me from behind.

“Jin Yeomyung of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan. I’ve been waiting so long for you.”

‘Waiting for me?’

In that instant—

An unexplainable sense of dread swept over my entire body.

Cheon Yura's expression was filled with satisfaction.

"That little brat from the Ma Clan earlier was quite decent."

She smiled ominously as she continued.

"But you, the one who supposedly took down Ma Chulsoo in a single blow—your skills seem even more promising."

Ah.

Shit.

So that was the reason.

That explained Ma Jinyoon's hostility toward me.

Why he put up such a fight in this ceremony, so unlike the past.

And why Cheon Yura was now looking at me like that.

The incident with Ma Chulsoo—whom I faced right after reincarnating—had triggered a butterfly effect and exploded in full force!

"If you fail to meet my expectations..."

Srrng...

"Then I think I'll be very disappointed in you."

'Oh, come on, seriously?!"

I scowled at the bloodlust emanating from directly ahead.

'Goddamn it.'

My original plan had been to pretend to put up a fight and then lose.

Just like Ma Jinyoon did moments ago.

But somehow, the fact that I had taken down Ma Chulsoo had reached Cheon Yura's ears.

And thanks to that, her expectations of me had inflated severalfold.

‘If I half-ass a loss now, she might see right through me.’

But if I put on a half-decent match, I’d immediately catch her interest.

Neither outcome was what I wanted.

‘That bastard Ma Chulsoo’s been nothing but a liability in my life.’

I cursed my past self from just a little while ago.

Honestly, if I were still in my days as Inner Administrator, I would’ve seen this outcome coming.

I’d gotten through the post-reincarnation crisis with my father too easily, and now it seemed the reins of tension in my heart had loosened just a little too much.

“There’s no need to delay any further. Ready your stance.”

“W-Wait a moment.”

I frantically searched for a way to get out of this situation.

‘No matter what, I’ve got to do everything I can to delay losing. Just like Ma Jinyoon did earlier!’

The only silver lining was that, thanks to the change in history, Cheon Yura had shown Ma Jinyoon some favor.

If I showed myself to be weaker than him, even if I got scolded a little, her attention might shift toward him instead of me.

‘...Toward Ma Jinyoon?’

For a moment, my thoughts hit a brief snag.

Then, as something seemed to click in my head, I forced a smile and reached out toward the servant girl beside me.

“Uh, Lady Sa... May I borrow your sword for a moment?”

“.....”

The expression of the servant I’d addressed as ‘Lady Sa’ twisted ever so slightly.

Though she wore the garb of a servant, she was actually from the Black Gold Sa Clan, one of the Six Great Demonic Clans.

Naturally, she carried a sword.

Without replying, she turned her head toward Cheon Yura.

Cheon Yura asked me with a curious expression.

“Does the Jin Clan use swords?”

“Yes, I’m not really suited for fistfights.”

“And yet you came here without bringing a sword?”

I could see the spark of irritation begin to surface in her expression.

Well, since it had come to this, I decided to go all in and act shamelessly.

“Isn’t this ultimately a place for ‘exchange’? I wasn’t told we’d be exchanging swords rather than words.”

“.....”

Her eyes narrowed.

Logically, I wasn’t wrong.

But still—shouldn’t I have at least looked into the temperament of the person I’d be exchanging with?

“Biyeon, lend that man your sword.”

“Yes, Young Cult Leader.”

She bowed politely and unbuckled the sword from her waist, tossing it to me.

“I’ve gone this far for you. I trust you’ll show a level of skill that pleases me.”

“...I’ll do my best.”

I slowly drew the blade from its sheath and raised it into a ready stance.

‘Man... at times like this, I really do think it would’ve been better to be born into a Righteous Sect.’

This was the problem with the Demonic Cult.

Even when you try to settle something with words, no one questions it when it turns into violence instead.

What kind of “exchange” is this? It’s basically a “duel”!

Flash!

Just then, as if to snap me out of my idle thoughts, Cheon Yura’s blade came slashing toward my forehead with enough force to split it open.

‘Are you insane?’

Not my shoulder, not my arm—she went straight for my head from the very start!

Her sword barely grazed past my forehead.

‘If I hadn’t sharpened my senses, my skull would’ve been pierced in a single strike!’

I shouted at her with a voice full of indignation.

“Why are you going for a killing blow right from the start?!”

She didn’t do this to Ma Jinyoon!

Cheon Yura answered nonchalantly.

“You dodged well. Since I have high expectations, I have to start at this level.”

“You insane woman!”

Crack!

It slipped out reflexively.

I gasped and tried to take it back, but a thick vein was already bulging on her forehead.

“Insane woman?”

“Ah, no—that is, I meant—!”

“Fine. Then try taking this insane woman’s sword!”

Cheon Yura, clearly furious, began striking at me mercilessly.

Clang-clang-clang!

In an instant, the entire hall rang with the sound of colliding blades.

Her technique was on another level—far more precise than Ma Chulsoo's had ever been.

Though she wasn't releasing Sword Qi, she was launching an unrelenting series of deadly attacks that left no room for mercy.

'Damn it! At this rate, I can't even pretend to lose at the right time!'

Every single strike was meant to kill—if I misjudged and let my guard down even slightly, I'd be skewered and sent to the afterlife!

She slashed at me like a demon for a full thirty seconds before suddenly pulling back.

Huff... huff...

I sucked in air desperately, catching my breath.

'B-Barely blocked all that...'

But why had she backed off all of a sudden?

"As I thought."

Her words hit me with a coldness sharper than the blades of the North Sea's eternal snows.

"My instincts weren't wrong."

And then came a blow worse than any strike from her sword—

"You've been hiding your skills, haven't you?"

Chapter 7: Young Cult Leader Exchange Ceremony (2)

"You're hiding your true strength, aren't you, you bastard."

The moment those words came out, my heart—which had barely managed to calm down—started pounding madly once more.

"I am giving it my all, though."

"If you're really going all out, how could you take my killing strike like that without even a scratch? And not a single counterattack?"

Ah.

Only then did I realize the mistake I had made.

I had been so focused on defending against her killing strike that I inadvertently blocked it too perfectly, even deflecting her sword entirely.

Cheon Yura's anger was gradually turning into killing intent.

"How dare you deceive me by not using your full strength?"

I desperately tried to explain myself.

"That's not it! It's just that your offense was so intense, I couldn't find the chance to mount a counterattack!"

"Don't spew nonsense!"

Cheon Yura once again charged at me with her sword raised.

Surprisingly, this time she didn't use a killing strike but applied a standard sword technique, scattering a flurry of sword attacks.

'Her offensive is softer than before. At this level...!'

This time, I shifted into an offensive stance and began countering her strikes.

'If I keep this offense-defense exchange going, I should be able to naturally lose without suspicion!'

Earlier, I had been too focused on defense because she was relentlessly aggressive. But now that I was unfolding offensive techniques, she would surely begin to notice the immaturity in my attacks.

There's no way she would miss such an opening, and once she did, it would naturally lead to my defeat.

"Haaap!"

I honestly deployed the first form of the Ten Heavenly Record Demonic Sword, Heaven-Flaming Flow.

A single strike combining a feint and a true attack, mimicking the flickering flow of fire.

‘Against a novice, this flow would confuse them and land successfully. But to an expert, it’s nothing but an enticing bait!’

Come on, counter it!

Sure enough, Cheon Yura smoothly deployed a flowing sword move and deflected my attack with ease.

Then, just like she had done against Ma Jinyoon earlier, she immediately countered toward my wrist—

Fwoosh!

...Huh?

I paused for a fraction of a second.

From the tip of Cheon Yura’s sword surging toward my wrist, black energy was streaming out in tendrils!

Wait, no way—

Sword Qi!?

‘No, this crazy woman—!’

At this rate, she was going to sever my wrist!

She had only used the back of her blade against Ma Jinyoon, but now she was using Sword Qi against me!?

I frantically altered my technique.

This insane woman seriously intended to cut off my wrist!

Claaang!

With a harsh metallic clang, my body was flung backward.

Of course it was—taking a direct hit from Sword Qi, even if blocked, would naturally send me flying.

“Guhk!”

A wrenching feeling twisted through my gut as bile surged up my throat.

If I had made one wrong move, I might've vomited everything I'd eaten that morning.

Cough! Cough! Hack!

As I clutched my chest, struggling to calm my overturned stomach—

“As I thought.”

Cheon Yura slowly approached me.

“You were hiding your strength, planning to fake a loss.”

What?

A chilling coldness pressed down against my skin.

“How dare you.”

Shwing!

“You think you can deceive me?”

Cheon Yura looked down on me with a voice colder than death itself.

From past experience, I could tell—

She had reached the peak of her fury.

‘Damn it.’

My whole plan had completely unraveled. That Sword Qi from earlier wasn’t just a casual strike—it had been her way of testing my true intentions, and I’d walked right into her trap.

In this state, Cheon Yura really might try to kill me.

“Young Master!”

Outside the arena, Gu Chil tried to rush in after watching the situation unfold.

“Please stop.”

But before he could, Sa Biyeon stood in his path.

“Step aside!”

“Anyone not invited to this exchange duel cannot interfere.”

Infuriated, Gu Chil began to emanate a wave of murderous intent toward her.

No matter how prestigious her family was, if she wasn’t at Young Cult Leader level, there’s no way she could survive if a Top-Class Assassin from the Divine Ghost Unit charged her.

But this was the Lesser Demon Hall.

Immediately, the experts from the Law Enforcement Court surrounded Gu Chil and suppressed his killing intent.

“Kh... Kghhk!”

As Gu Chil’s head was about to be taken, I urgently shouted out.

“Stop, Gu Chil!”

“Young Master!”

“This is something I must resolve. Don’t ever interfere.”

Using my sword as a cane, I slowly stood back up.

“Oh?”

At that, Cheon Yura let out a cold laugh.

“Finally decided to get serious?”

I replied with a blank expression.

“I have never not been serious.”

“This bastard, even to the end!”

An overwhelming surge of aura erupted from Cheon Yura’s entire body.

But I truly wasn’t lying.

I had never been anything but serious. It was just that my seriousness hadn’t been directed toward winning.

“If you wish to deceive me so badly... then I’ll grant your wish and kill you.”

Fwhoosh!

Sword Qi gathered once more on Cheon Yura's blade.

I, too, adjusted my stance to respond to her formation.

I focused everything on Cheon Yura's sword.

'If I can't block that, I'll really die.'

Shff... shff...

As she slowly drew her sword horizontally, a surprising thing happened—a trail of afterimages flowed from her sword's path.

This meant that she was truly enraged, and it was no different from a signal that she fully intended to kill her opponent.

'Heaven-Slaying Demonic Sword!'

The moment I recognized the identity of that sword technique, my grip on my sword tightened instinctively.

Of course, it couldn't compare to the peak of her prime when she wielded twelve different unique swords, but even so, this was still the technique hailed as the strongest sword style of the Demonic Faction.

Cheon Yura quietly called out the name of the technique.

"Six-Spirit Demonic Path."

'Here it comes!'

Cheon Yura's sword drew six separate trajectories through the air.

It was proof that her mastery had not even reached Minor Completion, let alone Great Completion.

But even so, that didn't mean I was capable of confronting it head-on in my current state.

'I have to either evade or redirect it—no matter what!'

Six strands of Sword Qi shot toward me, sealing off every possible direction of retreat.

If I held anything back, I would die.

The moment that thought flashed through my mind, I responded with my own surge of Sword Qi.

In my past life, just reaching the verge of being a First-rate Martial Artist wouldn't have been enough to pull this off—but this wasn't my first life.

Fwoosh!

“Y-Young Master!”

“Heeey?”

Gu Chil and Sa Biyeon, who had been watching from the sidelines, gasped in shock.

But I didn't have time to listen to their reactions. My arms and legs were already moving instinctively to preserve my life.

“Huuaah!”

Clang! Clang! Clang! Clang! Claaang! Clangclangclaaang!

Desperately, I blocked, evaded, and twisted my body to deflect the attacks.

No matter how vicious a technique may be—if you can withstand it head-on, a path to survival will always open.

Some of the Sword Qi I couldn't fully deflect grazed my body, drawing blood—

But in the end, I managed to block Cheon Yura's assault with all my limbs still intact.

“I blocked it!”

I cried out in triumph, thrilled that I had successfully fended off all six strands of Sword Qi.

“What do you mean, blocked?”

Slaaash!

A ‘black pillar’—on a completely different level from the previous Sword Qi—shot straight at my throat.

‘No way.’

I stared blankly at that black pillar of energy—no, at the Qi Projection.

No matter how much of my former instincts I had awakened, I couldn't dodge this.

Damn it.

Qi Projection at the age of eighteen?

I already knew that Cheon Yura at this point in time had surpassed the Master Level, but still—this was just too much.

I sensed the end of my third life approaching and closed my eyes.

And just like that, the sound of my head being sliced off—never came.

“Hoh hoh hoh.”

Was I hearing things?

The voice of a middle-aged man laughing echoed in my ears.

“You got a bit too heated there, Yura. Were you trying to bring down the entire Cult?”

‘That’s... not an illusion?’

Still with my eyes closed, I instinctively tightened the muscles in my neck. They responded. Which meant—my head was still attached.

Realizing that, I slowly opened my eyes.

“That was close, junior brother.”

And what I saw upon opening them was—

The side profile of a middle-aged man who had blocked Cheon Yura’s Qi Projection with a single finger.

Cold sweat poured down my back—I must’ve really been on the verge of death.

‘Am... am I alive?’

Swallowing hard, I looked at the figure before me.

He wore a black long robe adorned with ornate cloud patterns, and between them, a black dragon ascending toward the heavens.

That robe, akin to the dragon robe of a Central Plains emperor, was a special garment allowed to only one person in the entire Heavenly Demon Cult.

“...!!”

Only then did I recognize who it was.

Startled, I dropped into a proper stance and knelt on one knee.

“Heavenly Demon Descends, All Demons Prosper! I pay respects to the true Supreme One of the Cult!”

The one who had saved me from Cheon Yura’s Qi Projection—was a man of tremendous status.

No—he had to be.

He was the 28th Leader of the Heavenly Demon Cult, the current Grandmaster of the Demonic Faction.

Only the third in over a thousand years of Cult history to earn the title of Supreme One.

Heavenly Demon, Cheon Taejong.

He nodded slightly in response to my salute.

“Yes, junior brother of the Jin Clan. This is our first time meeting face to face, isn’t it?”

“Y-Yes, that’s correct.”

Across both past and present lives, I had never spoken this closely with the Heavenly Demon.

“Although... I don’t dare accept the title of junior brother. Please feel free to address me however you wish.”

“Haha, such a stiff fellow.”

The Cult Leader turned his gaze toward Cheon Yura.

“How long do you plan to keep that Qi Projection active?”

“Ah.”

Only then did Cheon Yura come to her senses and withdraw her energy.

Still, to block the Qi Projection of the Heavenly Demon Divine Art—said to be the mightiest power under the heavens—with just one finger...

He truly hadn't earned the title of Heavenly Demon for nothing.

At any rate, as the situation began to settle down, the Cult Leader sternly reprimanded Cheon Yura.

"You nearly started a civil war within the Cult today."

"T-That's...!"

Cheon Yura stammered, clearly flustered, but the Cult Leader continued without pause.

"If the Cheon Clan and Jin Clan were to clash, their supporters would inevitably join in, and the Cult would lose a quarter of its total strength. And then, wouldn't the Murim Alliance come storming into Ten Thousand Mountain, thinking this was their chance?"

Well, he was exaggerating a bit.

It wasn't like the Asura King, Jin Gun-ak, would declare war just because his child lost their head.

Of course, it probably didn't sound like that to Cheon Yura, who was on the receiving end of the scolding.

"In the end, your actions today nearly brought the Cult to ruin."

"...!"

Cheon Yura's figure trembled with rage and shame.

"Apologize. At the very least, since this is a mess that can still be cleaned up, you should take responsibility yourself."

No matter how similar their clan statuses might be, she was still the Young Cult Leader.

In this cult of strength, the Heavenly Demon Cult, it was unthinkable for a strong one to bow to a weaker one.

But the Heavenly Demon was the one person who held the authority to make the unthinkable happen.

"T-This!"

Cheon Yura's eyes, brimming with humiliation and shame, turned toward me.

“I—I’m sorry.”

“N-Not at all, Young Cult Leader.”

Wow.

I really just got an apology from Heartless Demonic Empress Cheon Yura.

Of course, it went without saying—there wasn’t an ounce of sincerity in that apology.

Behind those humiliated eyes, a fury burned so intensely, it looked like she wanted to devour me whole.

“Hm. That attitude of reflection—I like it.”

Whether he noticed that seething rage or not, the Cult Leader seemed quite satisfied with her apology.

“But the fact remains that junior brother’s life was in danger. Naturally, a simple apology isn’t enough.”

“C-Cult Leader!?”

“To make up for the disgrace you showed in today’s exchange duel, wouldn’t it make sense to continue seeing each other regularly?”

“...!?”

Wh—What kind of bullshit is that!?

Both I and Cheon Yura were so dumbfounded, we could only open and close our mouths silently.

Then the Cult Leader turned his head to look at me.

“The Jin Clan has raised their successor well. What’s your name, junior brother?”

I quickly knelt again and lowered my head in respect.

“Allow me to properly introduce myself! I am Jin Yeomyung, first son of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan, Cult Leader!”

“Good, good.”

For some reason—though I couldn’t begin to guess why—the Cult Leader seemed to be in a very good mood.

He looked at me and asked,

“I must say, now I’m curious. Why would someone with your level of talent show up in a place like this?”

My tongue froze mid-sentence as I reflexively tried to answer.

‘Talent? Don’t tell me this man was watching the duel between me and Cheon Yura from the very beginning?’

Damn it, this old man...

“I’m humbled by your praise, Cult Leader. I simply answered the call to fulfill my duty as the first son of the Jin Clan.”

“As the eldest son, wouldn’t that make you the Young Clan Head? You’re not telling me you don’t know the laws of the Cult, are you?”

According to the Cult’s laws, the heads and junior heads of the Six Great Demonic Clans—or those designated as their successors—were forbidden from becoming the spouse of the Cult Leader or Young Cult Leader.

It was a law enacted to prevent power from concentrating too heavily in one faction.

“I lack the talent for that position, so the role of Young Clan Head has already been designated to my younger brother.”

“Lack the talent, you say?”

The Cult Leader blinked slowly.

Yeah, I’d probably react the same way if I saw someone under twenty wield Sword Qi and then heard them say they were lacking in talent.

“Haha, yes. Lack of talent. I see. I understand completely.”

Yet for some reason, the Cult Leader didn’t pry further into that statement.

Instead, with a mischievous smile, he asked me this:

“Surely... you didn’t fall for our Yura enough to give up your position as Clan Head, did you?”

...Are you insane?

Chapter 8: Older Brother and Younger Brother (1)

I almost blurted out something purely on instinct.

Fortunately, my rationality kicked in just in time to swallow the words back down. If I had actually said them, my head would have been lopped off right then and there.

“.....”

I responded to that question with silence.

I mean, seriously—how could I fall for someone who had just threatened to cut off my head with Qi Projection? Any remaining affection was pretty much obliterated on the spot!

Just then, Sa Biyeon, who had been watching from a distance, stepped forward and knelt down.

“I greet the Cult Leader.”

“Yes, Biyeon. You’ve worked hard as always, supporting Yura.”

“It is only my duty as a cult member.”

As someone close to the Young Cult Leader, she naturally had some acquaintance with the Cult Leader as well.

The Cult Leader’s gaze turned back to me.

“So, you’re saying you’re not the young master of the Jin Clan?”

“Yes, that’s correct. I only came here to fulfill my duty.”

“Hmm, duty. A duty, is it...”

For some reason, I felt uneasy watching the Cult Leader smile in apparent satisfaction.

Wait a second.

‘Huh? Why do I feel killing intent?’

Suddenly, a familiar sense of killing intent pierced my skin.

Its source was none other than Cheon Yura.

‘Why is she glaring at me like that?’

Could she be mad that I indirectly told her I wasn’t interested in her?

But she was the one who tried to sabotage this meeting too!

While I was staring at her in disbelief, the Cult Leader stroked his short beard and spoke again.

“If you came to fulfill a duty, then you should carry it out to the end.”

“Yes, of course... Pardon?”

My mouth, which had reflexively started to reply, came to a halt.

What did he just say?

“What do you think? Regardless of her position as the Young Cult Leader, this exchange between members of the Cheon and Jin Clans is a highly important matter from the leadership’s perspective.”

“Of course, Cult Leader. ‘Grit’.”

Wait, why is she grinding her teeth while agreeing?

She’s even smiling while doing it. I think I finally understand what it means to smile while being furious.

“It’s settled then.”

Clap!

“I’ll inform the Jin Clan once the next exchange is scheduled.”

“.....”

“I hope to see you getting along well with our Yura next time too.”

“.....”

“Why aren’t you answering?”

“Y-Yes, understood.”

In the Heavenly Demon Cult, the words of the Heavenly Demon were absolute commands.

Which meant one thing:

‘I’m screwed.’

The plan I had to enter closed-door training for five years to focus on martial arts shattered right from the start.

So, the Heavenly Demon—who had simultaneously saved my life and thrown my plans into the trash—left behind one last remark:

‘Hoho, it’s been a while. I should go have a drink with that Jin brat.’

...And then he vanished.

“.....”

Now, in the lingering awkwardness of his absence, Cheon Yura was simply glaring at me.

“Uh, uhm.”

I let out a sound, unsure how to deal with her.

Honestly, my feelings were a mess.

I had ignored the final request of “Cheon Yura the Cult Leader,” and instead tried to help her in another way.

But that plan had been crushed from the start, and the bond I had tried to avoid was now showing signs of continuing—albeit in a strange form.

“Hey.”

In the middle of this chaotic situation, Cheon Yura—whom I thought would remain silent to the end—suddenly spoke to me.

“Yes, Young Cult Leader.”

I responded calmly to her words.

“I won’t apologize personally. After all, it’s true that you deceived me.”

Typical of her prideful personality.

But rather than the content of her words, I was more surprised by the fact that she said anything resembling an apology.

‘Normally, she wouldn’t have even said this much.’

She bit her lip slightly, then let out a quiet sigh.

“I get it—you don’t like me. That’s probably why you pulled that stunt. Still, with the Cult Leader’s command, even if we have no choice but to continue this exchange...”

“Uh, excuse me?”

I raised my hand to interrupt her.

Then I said,

“I don’t dislike you, though.”

“What?”

“I don’t dislike you, Young Cult Leader. Actually, I rather...”

Suddenly, I choked up, unable to finish the sentence.

“Rather what?”

After hesitating for a long while, I averted my eyes and mumbled,

“I rather like you.”

“.....”

“Of course, I mean in a platonic sense. Please don’t misunderstand.”

“Platonic?”

Her expression grew more and more bizarre, and I quickly cleared my throat to get things back on track.

“A-Anyway, I regret what happened today. My actions had nothing to do with you, Young Cult Leader—they were driven by personal reasons. Things have gotten a bit strange now, but...”

“I see.”

Cheon Yura trailed off.

Something about her expression hinted at relief, and that made me feel oddly conflicted.

Still, she seemed to have calmed down, so I took the chance to retreat from the scene.

“Well then, Young Cult Leader. I’ll see you again if the opportunity arises.”

“Wait.”

Ah, what now?

Just as I was about to turn away, she stopped me.

“Don’t call me Young Cult Leader.”

“...?”

“Don’t forget the purpose of this exchange. While the exchange is in effect, you and I are to shed our original positions and stand on equal footing.”

“Then... how should I address you?”

“Well, I don’t know?”

At my counter-question, Cheon Yura stammered, unable to find a proper response.

Honestly, just a little—her flustered look was kind of cute.

Without realizing it, I ended up using the same form of address I had uttered not long ago when speaking to the Cult Leader.

“Then, I’ll call you Lady Cheon Yura.”

“.....!”

As if that term was unbearably embarrassing, Cheon Yura’s face immediately turned bright red.

Sa Biyeon, who had been quietly observing from the side, let out a small gasp of admiration.

“Oh my.”

That conversation marked the end of the exchange event.

I slipped out of the Lesser Demon Hall as if fleeing and made my way home. Whatever thoughts were left behind in the minds of the others no longer concerned me.

“You were amazing, Young Master! Absolutely amazing!”

Gu Chil fussed excitedly beside me the entire way back.

“Well, I guess.”

I responded with a hollow voice. Honestly, my grand plan had just gone up in smoke, and I was left temporarily deflated.

“The Clan Head will be delighted! That brat from the Ma Clan may have survived, but you received the recognition of the Heavenly Demon himself!”

Gu Chil was genuinely overjoyed, as if this had happened to him, not me.

And yet, despite everyone’s congratulations, my thoughts were tangled in a mess.

‘Haah, what do I do now?’

With things turned out like this, closed-door training was no longer an option.

Of course, that didn’t mean I planned to neglect training, but the results were bound to fall short of what I had originally hoped for.

More importantly, through these continued exchanges, I would have to build a new relationship with her—something that hadn’t existed in my previous life.

That was the most burdensome part for me.

‘Should I just enter the Thousand-Day Pass?’

I sighed and shook my head.

‘Let’s just rest for now and think about it later.’

Still, the exchange had wrapped up relatively smoothly, which meant Jin Gun-ak wouldn’t have any reason to bother me for the time being.

If I could handle my interactions with the Young Cult Leader well, I’d have more freedom to move around without worrying about my family watching my every step.

Just as I consoled myself with those thoughts and passed the gates of the Jin Clan—

An unexpected person stood waiting to greet my return.

“So you’re finally back, Brother.”

A tall, strapping figure with a body packed with muscle, a whole head taller than me.

It was hard to believe he was only sixteen years old.

Regardless, in terms of lineage, he was my younger brother.

“Yeowoon?”

“Can’t you tell just by looking?”

Jin Yeowoon, the second son of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan, snorted and cocked his head.

“I heard you were in closed-door training?”

“It ended today.”

“Is that so. Then what’s the occasion? Why did you come out to greet me?”

Truthfully, the relationship between us wasn’t all that good.

To be honest, we looked so different that it was hard to believe we came from the same mother.

‘What’s sad is that the one who truly fits the Jin Clan isn’t me—it’s him.’

There were even rumors that the first and second sons had been switched at birth.

Once those rumors reached his ears, Jin Yeowoon developed a deep inferiority complex about being the second son.

On top of that, since I—despite being the eldest—had never contributed much to the clan and had neglected my martial arts, his view of me probably wasn’t far from how one might look at an insect.

“You were training in the cultivation room until you went to meet the Young Cult Leader, right?”

“So what?”

“Don’t tell me... now you’re eyeing the Young Clan Head’s seat?”

Ah, so that’s what this was really about?

I had wondered why someone who disliked me would come all the way out to greet me at the gate.

“You’re not ignorant of the clan’s laws, are you?”

“Hmph! You’re the eldest son. You could end things with the Young Cult Leader at any time, don’t think I don’t know that.”

For someone built like a bear, he sure had a sharp mind.

No matter how lazy I acted, I was still the firstborn. He must’ve thought he’d never beat me to the succession unless he seized the right opportunity.

“I don’t recognize you as the successor to this clan.”

He glared down at me, eyes wide.

“You don’t belong in the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan.”

I had to resist the urge to nod in agreement.

If someone were to line up me and Jin Yeowoon on either side of our father, the Asura King Jin Gun-ak, and ask who the rightful successor was—

One hundred out of one hundred would’ve pointed to Jin Yeowoon.

‘I accepted that in my past life and handed the clan over to you.’

And frankly, if my connection with Cheon Yura continued, he would likely still inherit the clan in this life as well.

The only issue was—

‘Should I really allow someone who holds such hostility toward me to become clan head again?’

In my past life, I stayed out of clan affairs until I became the Inner Administrator, so we had little reason to clash.

But in this life, where I planned to be more active, Jin Yeowoon could be a dangerous variable.

That’s when—

“Young Master Yeowoon! You’ve gone too far!”

Gu Chil, still elated from the results of the exchange, scolded Jin Yeowoon.

“The Young Master just returned after making great achievements for the Jin Clan! Far surpassing anything the other clan scions have done!”

But Gu Chil's protest was immediately cut short by Jin Yeowoon's cold retort.

"And who are you, a stray assassin from the streets, to insert yourself into a conversation between direct blood members of the Jin Clan?"

Flinch!

The one who reacted most to that comment wasn't even Gu Chil—it was Chief Byeok, the clan's Chief Administrator.

Hmm. I'd sensed this before in my past life too, but my younger brother had a real way with words. And I mean that in the worst way. Is that really something a sixteen-year-old should be saying?

Annoying as it was—really annoying—I figured I had to step in.

"Looks like someone needs a little manners correction."

"What?"

"And while we're at it, maybe a refresher course on etiquette."

If I wanted to avoid having my ankles shackled by the clan while I operated outside, I first needed to make this guy understand what it meant to have an older brother.

Upon realizing what I meant, Jin Yeowoon sneered.

"Are you serious right now, Brother?"

"Hmm. Come to think of it, we've never actually fought, have we?"

I'd heard the siblings of other clans beat each other to a pulp before forming tight bonds.

For us, a clan that used fists as weapons, to have never done that—it was truly a tragedy.

"In the Heavenly Demon Cult, etiquette education wasn't done with Confucian classics. It was taught with the rod of love."

"Do you even realize the nonsense you're spouting right now?"

Muscles rippled across Jin Yeowoon's entire body as he spoke.

Definitely looked the part of a direct bloodline descendant of the Jin Clan.

But I just chuckled and gave a thumbs-up, pointing inside.

“Follow me. Let’s head to the training yard.”

“Hah! I’ll finally get to see just how tough that outer skin of yours really is.”

There’s an old saying:

God designed siblings born from the same womb to be genetically predisposed to want to kill each other.

Back in the day, I thought it was nonsense.

But these days... it’s starting to sound pretty plausible.

Chapter 9: Older Brother and Younger Brother (2)

Jin Yeoon.

He was my biological younger brother, only a year younger than me.

Last year, at the age of fifteen, he had begun training in our family’s ultimate martial art, the Demonic Heaven Asura Divine Art, and now, he was already on the verge of reaching the third level—a prodigy in every sense.

And as anyone could see—

He was huge.

So huge, in fact, that it was hard to believe he was only sixteen.

“If you kneel and apologize right now, I’ll pretend this never happened.”

Jin Yeoon, who had followed me all the way to the training hall, grinned smugly.

“You do know that I was recently chosen as the youngest of the Six Demonic Dragons, right? You’re not picking this fight blindly, are you?”

“I know.”

I answered briefly.

“Being named one of the Six Demonic Dragons at sixteen is something to brag about.”

“Hahaha, right? I know, right!”

He laughed freely, clearly pleased by the compliment.

Truth be told, Yeowoon's rise to become one of the Six Demonic Dragons had been a defining moment in securing his position as the future Young Clan Head.

They were the demonic counterpart to the Orthodox faction's Six Divine Dragons—the six most promising young warriors in the martial world.

Sure, it wasn't like our family's prestige didn't help, but it still meant that his talent was recognized not just within the Jin Clan, but across the entire cult.

Yeowoon tilted his chin up arrogantly.

"And yet, you challenged me to a martial duel. You must be pretty confident in your skills, big brother."

"Of course. It's not like I lack confidence."

"I heard from the Chief Administrator that you've been learning some strange martial art—not the Demonic Heaven Asura Divine Art, or any other from the main family."

Had that rumor already reached his ears?

I glared at Chief Byeok in disbelief.

Instantly, he turned his head the other way.

'I'll deal with you later.'

It was one thing for him to be chummy with my younger brother—but blabbering about my techniques was a different problem altogether.

"You said you were going to teach me manners, big brother. I guess it's only fair that I teach you a little etiquette too."

"What kind of etiquette are we talking about?"

"That even the eldest son shouldn't act carelessly in front of the Young Clan Head."

"You're already acting like you're the Young Clan Head, huh?"

Of course, if things went as they should, he would become the Young Clan Head within a year.

And I didn't particularly intend to stop that.

But—

“There are three reasons why I challenged you to a duel today.”

“Go ahead, I’m all ears.”

He crossed his arms and grinned arrogantly. His posture practically screamed, ‘This is your last will and testament, so get it off your chest.’

“First, you’ve been mistreating the people of the Jin Clan who you’ll one day be leading.”

This wasn’t just about the incident with Gu Chil.

His overwhelming talent had overshadowed it, but Yeowoon’s true nature was violent and arrogant. He had a tendency to look down on those beneath him.

The fact that I, despite being born of a side branch, had been able to rise to the position of Inner Administrator was partly due to the Cult Leader’s support—but also because Yeowoon’s personality had begun to erode the family’s potential from within.

“Do you even know how many people belong to the Jin Clan?”

“Nope. Maybe a few thousand?”

“As of last month’s records, it was 42,650.”

“What?!”

The moment those words left my mouth, Chief Byeok widened his eyes in shock.

That was information a direct descendant should obviously know—but he clearly hadn’t expected that I actually did.

Yeowoon muttered bitterly.

“That’s... quite a lot.”

“Of course, the number of martial artists who can actually fight is only a few thousand, as you said. But they aren’t the entirety of the Jin Clan. Those who live under our influence, and receive stipends from us—they span all across the Central Plains. All of them are part of the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“As the future Young Clan Head, you will become their father. But if things keep going as they are, I don’t think that’s going to end well.”

“Ha! And here I thought I’d heard everything—hearing that from you, the Eldest Son, is just absurd.”

At his sharp jab, the faint smile on my lips twisted slightly.

I let out a bitter sigh.

“You’re right. I’ve kept myself distant from clan affairs until now. But that ends today.”

“So, what are the other two reasons?”

“Second, even if you’ve been named one of the Six Demonic Dragons, there’s always someone stronger. If you don’t learn humility now, it’s going to cost you dearly later.”

This was a genuine warning, born from someone who had seen the future.

Honestly, even as a Six Demonic Dragon, Yeowoon was only on par with that Ma Chulsoo to me now.

But Yeowoon didn’t know that, and his expression started to contort.

Rage and killing intent began to cloud his eyes.

“And the last?”

“The last reason is—well, I am the Eldest Son, and since my little brother keeps testing me endlessly, I figured it’s about time I broke that cocky spirit of yours.”

In truth, that was probably the most heartfelt reason of the three.

“Oh yeah?”

Bwoong!

Before the words had even finished, a massive fist came flying at my face.

A direct, honest strike—One-Point Penetration.

It was a simple motion, just a punch, but it had an official name. It was a proper technique from the Jin Clan’s martial arts.

Conquering Self Through Asura King’s Fist.

Unyielding Self-Discipline.

If that hit me squarely, my head would explode from the sheer power behind it.

But I lightly twisted my body and dodged his punch.

“You’re pretty pissed off, huh.”

Even if he lacked finesse, the raw power alone justified his title as one of the Six Demonic Dragons. If that punch had landed properly, I wouldn’t have gotten away with just a broken nose.

“You dodged that?”

Yeowoon widened his eyes and glared at me as he took a few steps back.

“So, you’re saying you had a trick or two up your sleeve, huh?”

The killing intent radiating from Yeowoon’s body was intensifying.

I clicked my tongue at the sight.

“The Demonic Heaven Asura Divine Art has an inherently tyrannical nature. That’s why it must be cultivated alongside a mental discipline technique to suppress its demonic influence. Judging from the way you look now, I’m guessing you’ve neglected your mental training?”

“Shut up!”

As the heavy killing aura surged, Yeowoon charged in again.

“Hmph.”

Was it because I was too composed?

Gu Chil raised his voice in a panic.

“Young Clan Head! Your sword! Draw your sword!”

“Why would I need a sword for a guy like him?”

Even if he had trained the main family’s supreme martial art up to the third level, at his core, he was still just a sixteen-year-old with little real experience.

Swish—

I slowly took a stance.

Before one could learn the Conquering Self Through Asura King’s Fist, they had to go through the foundational martial art:

The basic starting form of the Hundred-Linked Demon Camp Style.

“Ha! The Demon Camp Style? Are you kidding me right now!?”

The Hundred-Linked Demon Camp Style was a foundational martial art encompassing fist techniques, physical movement, footwork, and body techniques.

Since I’d just displayed its basic starting form, it was understandable that he’d react like that.

But—

“You think it’s trivial? Is that how it looks to you?”

If he truly thought that, he was in for a rude awakening.

“I’m going to cripple you!”

At Jin Yeowoon’s bold declaration, a vein bulged on my forehead.

“This brat... Did he just utter such blasphemy to his own brother?”

“Shut up!”

A dark aura—Dark Qi—gathered around Jin Yeowoon’s fist.

“Triple Deadly Wild Rush!”

Like a charging bull, three heavy strikes surged toward me, aiming to crush my whole body.

His talent was undeniable. Even his aura exuded a strength beyond his years.

Still...

‘As I thought, he’s leagues below her.’

Neither the precision of his techniques nor the sharpness of his offense could compare—

Not to Cheon Yura’s sword.

Suddenly, I found myself smirking at the realization.

‘Is this the side effect of facing a monster from the start? This guy just seems... lacking.’

Sure, twenty years from now, he'd be called one of the twin prodigies of the cult, alongside Ma Chulsoo.

But for now, he was far from impressive.

"You're laughing!?"

To him, my smirk must've looked like mockery.

"You're dead!"

"You wish."

Moving lightly with footwork, I dodged every punch, then used the rotational force to swing around and kick him in the back.

Thwack!

"Ooh!"

"He dodged that ferocious attack so effortlessly!"

"And even landed a counterattack!"

Cheers erupted from the spectators.

Yeowoon's face flushed red with shame.

"Y-you bastard!"

Even if he hadn't taken any real damage, just the fact that I kicked him in the back was enough to humiliate him.

"Raaagh!"

A flurry of final techniques from the Conquering Self Through Asura King's Fist burst out in his rage.

He lashed out madly with his fists. But of course, not a single strike grazed me.

"W-why won't any of my attacks land!?"

After about fifteen minutes had passed—

'Looks like he's starting to come to his senses.'

Maybe it was the backlash of expelling too much qi in a short time.

I could see the demonic energy and fury forcibly calming within him.

Jin Yeowoon shouted in frustration.

“All you’re doing is dodging like a rat! Don’t you have any pride, big brother!?”

“Isn’t the real problem that you can’t land a single hit?”

Nod, nod!

The many martial artists watching the duel nodded in agreement.

I opened the folding fan tucked into my waist and smiled.

“It’s not because I’m so skilled, little brother.”

“What?”

“The fact that I’m only dodging, and yet you still can’t hit me—that’s your problem. More importantly, I haven’t created more than three steps of distance between us since this duel began.”

“...!”

Yeowoon’s face stiffened as he realized I was right.

“The Conquering Self Through Asura King’s Fist is one of the most overwhelming martial arts in the entire cult. But because of that, cultivating physical flexibility is essential to master it properly.”

During adolescence, when bodily coordination is crucial, the Demon Camp Style is more important than any other martial art within the Jin Clan.

Even I, after learning two martial arts, never once neglected my training in it.

By contrast, Jin Yeowoon had entered the main family’s advanced martial art far too early.

Of course, with time, his training would eventually make up for his body’s current flaws, but until then, he’d suffer a loss in efficiency.

“Your talent is remarkable—entering the main family’s supreme art at fifteen—but even so, you should not have neglected the Hundred-Linked Demon Camp Style, the very thing you looked down on so much.”

“Grrk!”

“Even with stiff, rigid movements like that, the footwork of the Demon Camp Style alone is more than enough to dodge them.”

His personality might’ve been explosive, but the kid’s martial talent was real—he’d understood my point.

“Y-you bastard!”

But understanding and accepting were two different things for someone like him.

“Don’t act like you know everything! A guy like you who slacked off on martial arts—what do you know to lecture me!?”

Jin Yeowoon’s voice carried a resentment that had clearly been festering for a long time.

“While you were being scorned as the idle firstborn of the Jin Clan, I trained until I vomited blood. I did everything I could to shed the cursed label of the ‘Second Son’—I worked harder than anyone!”

I understood that pain.

And because I did, I nodded.

“I know. That’s exactly why I never coveted the Young Clan Head’s seat that was handed to you.”

“.....!”

“I told you already—there’s always someone above you. If you don’t realize what you’re lacking today, this weakness will cling to your ankles for a very long time.”

Jin Yeowoon fell silent.

This time, maybe my words had struck home. He stood with his head bowed for quite a while, clearly wrestling with inner conflict.

Then—

Whip!

He ground his teeth and turned around.

And in a low voice, he said,

“.....I’ll take the advice. But next time, I won’t let it end like this.”

The same little brother who’d always talked back and treated me like I was beneath him... was saying something like that now?

A quiet swell of pride rose in my chest.

Still, that aside—

“Hey, little brother. Back to your place.”

“...?”

As I untied the sword hanging from my waist, I spoke again.

“I told you, didn’t I? I challenged you today for three reasons. What just happened? That was only one of them.”

“W-what?”

“There are still two left, little brother.”

Sword still in its scabbard, I rested it on my shoulder and gave him a dangerous look.

“You still don’t know how to rule those beneath you as a direct blood of the Jin Clan.”

“B-big brother?”

“And you also haven’t learned how to properly revere your elder brother, who is greater than the heavens.”

Gooooooh...!

The murderous aura that began pouring from my body made what Jin Yeowoon had shown earlier look like a gentle breeze.

“From this moment on, I’ll teach you both of those things—directly, through your body.”

“W-wait a second!?”

He’d acted like a madman up until now, so it was only fair that now he got beaten like one.

A dark aura began to flow from the scabbard hanging on my shoulder.

But it didn’t just take on form—it began to manifest into a distinct shape.

“S-sword qi!?”

A martial artist who could manifest Sword Qi at just seventeen?

Even Jin Yeowoon, at this point, could barely exude a visible aura, much less manifest Fist Qi.

Just being at that level of Qi Manifestation was enough to earn him a spot among the Six Demonic Dragons.

But Sword Qi?

To him, this was probably like the sky falling down.

“I didn’t put any slicing power into it, so don’t worry, little brother.”

“B-big brother? Your little brother here is just filled with boundless respect for you and simply failed to express it properly...”

I never knew Jin Yeowoon could wag his tongue so extravagantly.

But—

“Etiquette isn’t something you show with your tongue alone, little brother!”

And with that, I lunged at my beloved younger brother.

“Guaaaargh!”

And so, it was said that until the Asura King, Jin Gun-ak, returned late that night to the main house, the Jin Clan’s training ground echoed endlessly with the sounds of someone screaming and crying.

Chapter 10: The Sure Fire Plan (1)

Dozens of candles burned, illuminating the surroundings.

Despite the space being quite expansive, the stands on both sides were crammed to a suffocating degree with countless luxury items.

Scrolls bearing the poetry and paintings of renowned calligraphers who once made waves across the Central Plains.

Celadon and porcelain imported from the Eastern countries.

Even treasures adorned with gold and jewels.

All of these were decorations inside the study of Jin Gun-ak, the head of the Demonic Heaven's Jin Clan.

"Yes, you pulled off something rather amusing."

Inwardly, he had beaten up Jin Yeowoon, who was practically confirmed to be the next Young Clan Head.

When I returned to the main house, Jin Gun-ak's expression of dumbfounded disbelief had been quite the rare sight.

And yet, rather than getting angry, Jin Gun-ak was surprisingly pleased with me.

He hadn't asked what martial arts I had learned or how I had trained.

To him, the only thing that mattered was the result.

"The Cult Leader couldn't stop praising you."

"Those words are far more than I deserve."

"And me, as well."

Hmm?

Jin Gun-ak had been praised by the Heavenly Demon?

Though he had already drunk quite a bit outside, Jin Gun-ak didn't put down his cup even at home.

"He was impressed by the boldness of a man like me, offering someone like you for his daughter."

Was that sarcasm or praise?

"Heh heh heh, how should I take that?"

With a subtly complex expression, Jin Gun-ak took another drink.

But the emotion I could clearly sense behind that look was none other than greed.

"My son."

"Yes, Father."

"Do you want to become the Young Clan Head?"

I didn't answer that question immediately.

If I nodded right here and said I wanted to be the Young Clan Head, then I could probably be appointed as early as tomorrow.

But that wasn't the answer Jin Gun-ak truly desired deep down.

"Please give the position of Young Clan Head to Yeowoon."

"Oh?"

"Unlike me, who has been wandering outside, Yeowoon has consistently proven his worth within the main household."

With a solemn expression, I bowed my head.

"I will do my utmost to stay close to the Young Cult Leader and contribute to enhancing the prestige of our clan."

"....."

Jin Gun-ak didn't respond to my words and simply sipped his drink in silence.

But I could tell.

My answer must have filled him with considerable satisfaction.

"You truly have no interest in the position of Young Clan Head?"

"It's more efficient for the clan's development this way."

This recent event may have led to a reevaluation of my martial prowess and potential, but that didn't mean the main house's warriors would immediately rally behind me.

To truly make it work, consistent socializing and political maneuvering would be essential.

'But honestly, all that sounds like a pain and a huge waste of time.'

To take control of the Jin Clan in the future, all I needed was to keep Jin Yeowoon under my thumb.

After a while, Jin Gun-ak finally spoke.

"I never imagined you would think so deeply about the clan's prestige."

“Our Jin Clan cannot continue being seen as second to the Ma Clan or the Pa Clan, can we?”

That remark immediately drew a displeased look on Jin Gun-ak’s face.

“We are the strongest. There’s no clan above us, except for the Cheon Clan.”

“That may be true in reality, but aren’t the ignorant outsiders’ evaluations different?”

That was Jin Gun-ak’s reverse scale—his most sensitive spot.

Among the Six Great Demonic Clans, the Jin Clan had always been rated below the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan and the Extreme Pa Clan.

In terms of actual power and influence within the Cult, they fell just a bit short when compared to those two clans.

Jin Gun-ak had spent his life desperately trying to change that, yet all he had achieved was narrowing the gap, not overcoming it.

“I intend to change that. While the other clans waste their potential on successor conflicts, if Yeowoon and I strengthen both our internal and external foundations—”

“If you do?”

“Then in the next generation, the Demonic Heaven’s Jin Clan will be called the greatest among the Six Clans.”

Coincidentally, the direct heirs of the Six Great Clans were mostly of similar age.

That made their rivalry all the more intense.

‘But before any external competition, they’d been busy tearing each other apart over succession.’

In the case of the Blood Dragon Demonic Clan, there were four direct male heirs, including Ma Chulsoo and Ma Jinyoon.

The same was true for the Black Gold Sa Clan and the other clans—they were all in similar situations.

The Jin Clan, on the other hand, had avoided internal damage thanks to my early withdrawal from the succession race, which allowed everyone to rally around Jin Yeowoon.

Unfortunately, Yeowoon's inability to control his violent nature had caused him to miss the opportunity of a lifetime.

'Now that I think about it, the hidden powers rising within the Cult may have only gained traction because the Six Clans remained embroiled in internal strife.'

If I really think about it, there's a chance those factions might have even meddled in the succession disputes...

But that deepening train of thought was interrupted by Jin Gun-ak's next words.

Thud!

He slammed his cup down and smirked bitterly.

"An excellent idea."

"Thank you."

"If we could gain the support of the Cheon Clan, then our clan's status would be beyond compare to the other five."

The divine and inviolable bloodline—Cheon Clan.

Their power was formidable, but their symbolism alone exerted absolute influence over the Cult's members.

"Until now, the in-laws of past Cult Leaders had their power restricted by the Cult's laws and the Leaders themselves. But the next era will be different."

The current Young Cult Leader, Cheon Yura, was a woman.

And the current Cult Leader was the ultimate being, known as the Heavenly Demon.

Naturally, the next Cult Leader, Cheon Yura, would possess relatively less authority.

With my head bowed, I quietly spoke.

"The next Cult Leader's authority may depend on how much power her in-laws can support her with."

"Bwahaha! Exactly, exactly!"

And accordingly, it was obvious that her in-laws' power would grow just as much.

Jin Gun-ak looked at me with a meaningful gaze.

“Can you do it?”

“I will make it happen.”

“Good. I like how cool-headed you’ve become these days.”

He sipped from his cup with satisfaction, then unexpectedly asked:

“Is there anything you want?”

“.....!”

“If it’s for your success, then as your father, it’s only right I give you my full support.”

‘He looks like he’s in a really good mood.’

The fact that Jin Gun-ak was talking about fulfilling his duties as a father made me scoff inwardly.

Still, it would be a huge waste to throw away this opportunity.

“In that case, I humbly request something from you, Clan Head.”

I cautiously made a few requests to Jin Gun-ak.

Though he frowned slightly at the unexpected contents, he ultimately agreed to them.

The next day.

I was walking through the bustling district of Miokseong with Gu Chil.

Miokseong, often said to be a perfect replica of Hangzhou’s culture from the Central Plains, was responsible for the Cult’s entertainment and economy.

It was also a place I had a deep connection with—one could even say I spent half my life here in my previous life.

“Oh my, big young master! We’ve got some fine fruit today—how about a taste?”

“Hmm, let me see.”

“Fresh peaches, just in today!”

“Not a fan of the hard ones. Got anything softer?”

“This is silk imported from distant Jiangsu Province!”

“Nice sheen on it.”

It was still daytime, so the area was focused more on economic activity than entertainment.

As I pushed through the crowded streets, I sank deep into thought.

‘The matter of the Jin Clan is mostly settled.’

Now that I had the support of Jin Gun-ak, the clan head, it was safe to say that most internal obstacles had been removed.

‘There are still a few elders who see me as a thorn in their side, but as long as I don’t stand out too much, they won’t bother making a move.’

Normally, I should be cutting off outings like this and focusing on my training.

But the five years of closed-door cultivation had already gone down the drain thanks to my engagement with Cheon Yura.

‘In that case, it might be better to start digging into the identities of those hidden factions.’

Cheon Yura had gone to excessive lengths to isolate herself from the rest of the Cult in order to assert her authority.

As a result, the Protection Division and parts of the Five Main Divisions—those who should have been closest to the Cult Leader—ended up betraying her.

And the final nail in the coffin was driven in by Han Mubaek, the Demonic Faction Lord, who had been a hidden mole from the start.

‘Timing-wise, it likely all started when Cheon Yura became the Cult Leader. The current Cult Leader’s reign is overwhelmingly solid.’

Even the Protection Division, which had once betrayed Cheon Yura, was probably fully loyal to the current Cult Leader by now.

‘But I still can’t shake my doubts about the Heavenly Thunder Corps. Even if it was formed under the current Cult Leader’s command and staffed with only his closest aides...’

In truth, in the future, the Heavenly Thunder Corps would grow powerful enough to all but dominate the Cult.

And yet, when the betrayers led by Han Mubaek were exposed, Heavenly Thunder Corps hadn't been involved.

Still, I couldn't just overlook the fact that it was members of the Heavenly Thunder Corps who recommended Han Mubaek for the upcoming selection for the *Demonic Faction Lord* position, set to take place a few years from now.

'It's highly suspicious. How could the Heavenly Thunder Corps, holding so much power, not notice betrayals from the Protection Division and some of the Six Clans?'

Especially when Heavenly Thunder Corps was also responsible for overseeing the Cult's intelligence network.

'If I'm going to dig, then I should start with Heavenly Thunder Corps. Right now, it's too early for "them" to have contacted any new traitors. Even if they did, I wouldn't find any proof yet.'

One of the reasons I returned to Miokseong at this particular time was for this very purpose.

Crunch, crunch.

'Well, all that's fine, but...'

I gave a withering glance to the big brute behind me who was noisily munching an apple.

"Why are you following me, little brother?"

Jin Yeowoon, who had snatched an apple from some old lady earlier, answered with a sulky face.

"What about you, brother? What are you doing here instead of training?"

"I asked first."

At that, he gave a small scoff and replied.

"Hmph. I was just curious. What have you been doing to get so strong all of a sudden?"

Yeowoon was a beast when it came to competitiveness, and his pride was just as fierce.

It was hard to believe someone like him would swallow his pride just to observe me.

But aside from that...

‘Should I really take this guy with me?’

Where I was headed now was one of the shadiest corners of Miokseong.

Even as a direct heir of the Six Clans, getting involved in the wrong way could become a serious headache.

I snorted and shook my head.

‘It should be fine. A troublesome situation and an unmanageable one are two different things.’

“Take care of yourself.”

“Of course I will!”

Flexing his bulging muscles, Jin Yeowoon fell silent for a moment, but his curiosity soon flared up again.

“So, where are we going? This isn’t one of those fancy shopping districts you like.”

“This is the Black Market.”

“Black Market? What kind of place is that?”

Having spent his life focused solely on martial arts until the age of sixteen, Jin Yeowoon was still rather ignorant of the outside world.

“It’s a kind of black market.”

“I’ve heard black markets are where illegal goods are bought and sold. Isn’t this a place where excommunicated criminals who violated the Cult’s laws gather?”

I chuckled softly at his naivety.

“Little brother, remember just one thing.”

“What is it?”

“In this Ten Thousand Mountain stronghold, the concept of ‘illegal’ barely exists.”

Things were only tucked away in shady corners because it was best that regular cult members didn’t stumble across them.

In truth, every event or activity within the main Cult was strictly controlled by the Cheon Clan and the Six Great Demonic Clans.

Which meant this black market too was under the influence of one of the Six Clans.

As we walked, our path began to draw closer to the rear gates of Miokseong.

Accordingly, the surrounding atmosphere turned drastically more subdued.

‘Looks like we’re getting close.’

Men with grim expressions and weapons at their sides began to appear. The sinister killing intent they gave off prickled at my skin from every direction.

“Not exactly a cheerful place, is it.”

Jin Yeowoon frowned as he muttered his thoughts.

“Brother, is this the kind of place you’ve been hanging around to sharpen your skills?”

“No. I’ve only been here maybe twice before.”

Back when I was living like a layabout, I had no ties to this place. I only discovered it much later, after becoming the Inner Administrator and investigating the Cult’s inner workings.

Our steps halted in front of a fairly grand building located deep within the black market.

“Quite the luxurious look, considering the surroundings.”

Jin Yeowoon muttered his thoughts under his breath.

“What’s this place?”

“*Amgeumgak*—the Hidden Gold Pavilion. It’s the place that actually controls this black market.”

The state of the building was remarkably unchanged from my time as Inner Administrator to now.

Creeaak!

Without hesitation, I pushed open the entrance to the building.

Step. Step.

“Hmm!”

Behind me, Jin Yeowoon let out a small groan as he glanced inside.

Led by an elderly man, a row of warriors dressed in black robes stood in perfect formation.

“They knew we were coming?”

“With your giant frame? I’d say it was only a matter of time before word spread.”

“Welcome, honored guests of the Jin Clan.”

I gave a small chuckle and asked the old man who greeted us:

“How long have you known we were coming?”

“No event in the black market escapes our attention.”

‘So, from the beginning.’

The old man bowed deeply, his hands folded neatly in front of him.

“What brings such honored guests of the Jin Clan to the underbelly of society?”

“Obviously, to do something less than upright, no?”

“.....”

He hadn’t expected me to be so blunt—his forced smile cracked slightly.

“But someone like you isn’t worth talking to. Bring out the highest-ranking manager here.”

“I am the one in charge of this place.”

He lied boldly without batting an eye.

Tilting my head to one side, I lowered my voice.

“*Golden Crow Demon*, Oh Gunjong.”

When I clearly said his name and alias, a slight tremor ran through Oh Gunjong’s shoulders.

“To speak with the Eldest Son of the Jin Clan, you should at least send someone from the Sa Clan, don’t you think?”

Ssssshhh.

Slowly raising his head, Oh Gunjong's expression had already turned cold.

“How did you know?”